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OMAN THROUGH BRITISH EYES:  
BRITISH TRAVEL WRITING ON OMAN  
FROM 1800 TO 1970.

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# Abstract

This thesis focuses on the images of Oman in British travel writing from 1800 to 1970. In texts that vary from travel accounts to sailors' memoirs, complete travelogues, autobiographies, and letters, it looks at British representations of Oman as a place, people, and culture. It argues that these writings are heterogeneous and discontinuous throughout the periods under consideration. Offering diverse voices from British travellers, this thesis challenges Edward Said's project in *Orientalism* (1978) which looks to Western discourse on the Middle East homogenisingly as Eurocentric and hostile. Chapter one explores and discusses the current Orientalist debate suggesting alternatives to the dilemma of Orientalism and providing a framework for the arguments in the ensuing chapters. Chapter two outlines the historical Omani-British relations, and examines the travel accounts and memoirs written by several British merchants and sailors who stopped in Muscat and other Omani coastal cities during their route from Britain to India and vice versa in the nineteenth century. Chapter three is concerned with the works of travellers who penetrated the Interior of Oman. James Wellsted's *Travels in Arabia* (1838), Samuel Miles's *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf* (1919) and other uncollected travel accounts, and Bertram Thomas's *Alarms and Excursions* (1932) are investigated in this chapter. Chapter four considers the travellers who explored Dhofar in the southern Oman and the Ruba Al-Khali or the Empty Quarter. Precisely, it is devoted to Bertram Thomas's *Arabia Felix* (1932) and Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands* (1959). Chapter five looks at the last generation of British travellers who were in Oman from 1950 to 1970 employed either by oil companies or the Sultan Said bin Taimur. It explores Edward Henderson's *Arabian Destiny* (1988), David Gwynne-James's *Letters from Oman* (2001), and Ian Skeet's *Muscat and Oman* (1974). This thesis concludes with final remarks on British travel writing on Oman and recommendations for future studies related to the subject. The gap of knowledge that this thesis undertakes to fill is that most of the texts under discussion have not been studied in any context.

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## Dedication

To my children Yamen and Majd: in their first steps of learning.



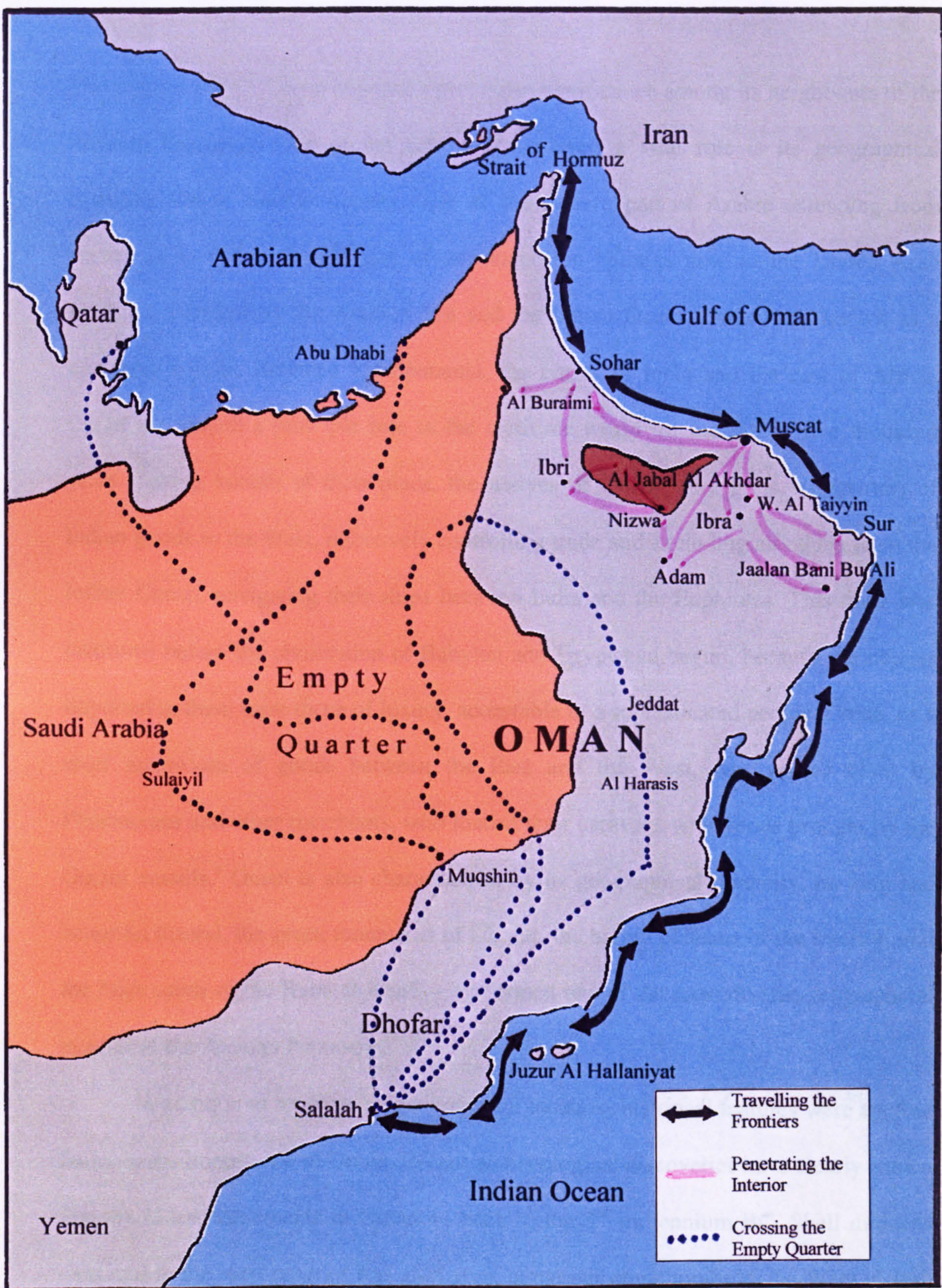


Figure 1 – Routes map of British travellers in Oman from 1800-1970



## Introduction

Throughout history Oman enjoyed a particular significance among its neighbours of the Arabian Peninsula. One of the factors that played a vital role is its geographical situation. Oman used to occupy most of the eastern part of Arabia extending from Hadramut to Qatar, though part of this extension belongs now to the United Arab Emirates. Flanked by the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, Oman was known as a 'seafaring nation'. Between Mesopotamia, the coasts of India and the east of Africa, Oman has played a principle role in the maritime world for more than five thousand years. Taking benefit of their place, the natives of Oman were great transporters of Indian goods to the West, effectively controlling trade and excluding all others from the Indian Ocean, navigating their ships between India and the Euphrates. This trade was unknown before the civilization of Babylon and Egypt had begun, because the objects imported to them were those of luxury, acceptable to a sophisticated people. Oman, as a chief emporium of goods between the East and the West, was visited often by Phoenicians and other merchants, who loaded their caravans with goods brought by the Omani vessels.<sup>1</sup> Oman is also characterized by its geographical diversity. Its long and beautiful littoral, the green mountains of Dhofar, the barren plateaus of the Interior, and the huge sands of the Ruba al-Khali— all formed one of the most diverse geographical regions in the Arabian Peninsula.

In addition to its strategic geographical location, historical features were another factor in the importance of Oman. Recent archaeological discoveries have clearly shown that the oldest settlements in Oman go back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. Shell middens clustered in the west coast of Ras al-Hamra, numerous stone tombs of the Wadi al-Jizi,

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<sup>1</sup> See Samuel B. Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1994), pp. 11-13. For Oman's importance as a maritime power in the past, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see: Ministry of Information and Culture, *Oman, a Seafaring Nation* (Muscat, 1979).

towers and pottery of Bat, reed boats and the Harappan painted jar discovered in Ras al-Jinz have demonstrated the prehistory of Oman.<sup>2</sup> Archaeological studies also suggest that Oman in that era was known as Magan, an empire flourished along the Batinah coast, exploiting the rich veins of copper found in the mountains around Sohar. Its boats used to anchor at Dilmun, the ancient name of Bahrain, and at Mesopotamia carrying copper which the Sumerians and later the Babylonians needed to adorn their temples. 'Magan boats' also used to sail to the Indus Valley laden with other valuable goods: jewellery, copper tools, sesame oil, woven fabric, wood, and bronze statues.<sup>3</sup>

The third factor is the political aspect. From the dawn of Islam until the present, Oman has been an independent political entity. In the eighth century, after the death of Uthman bin Affan, the fourth Caliph of Islam, Oman witnessed a major event in its history, namely the importation from Basra of a particular understanding of Islam called Ibadism. The Ibadies rejected the prevailing ideas that the leadership should be restricted to the clan of the Prophet. Instead, they believed that the head of the community should be the person best suited to this duty by virtue of his religious knowledge and military skill, regardless of his tribe or race. Accepting and defending Ibadism, Oman maintained its independence from all the powers of Caliphs in Baghdad; they tried to impose their authority several times, but always in vain.<sup>4</sup> During the

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<sup>2</sup> For more details about these archaeological discoveries, see: Silvio Durante and Maurizio Tosi, 'The Aceramic Shell Middens of Ra's al-Hamra: a Preliminary Note', *The Journal of Oman Studies*, 3, part. 2 (1977), 137-162, Karen Frifelt, 'Further Evidence of the Third Millennium BC Town at Bat in Oman', *The Journal of Oman Studies*, 7 (1985), 89-104, Serge Cleuziou and Maurizio Tosi, 'Ra's al-Jinz and the Prehistoric Coastal Cultures of the Ja'alan', *The Journal of Oman Studies*, 11 (2000), 19-73, and Tome Vosmer, 'Model of a Third Millennium BC Reed Boat Based on Evidence from Ra's al-Jinz', *The Journal of Oman Studies*, 11 (2000), 149-152.

<sup>3</sup> On the era of Magan, see: John Hansman, 'A "Periplus" of Magan and Meluhha', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 36, no. 3 (1973), 554-587, Thierry Berthoud and Serge Cleuziou, 'Framing Communities of the Oman Peninsula and the Copper of Makkan', *The Journal of Oman Studies*, 6, part. 2 (1983), 239-246, Gerd Weisgerber, 'Copper Production during the Third Millennium BC in Oman and the Question of Makkan', *The Journal of Oman Studies*, 6, part. 2 (1983), 269-276, and Daniel T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), I, pp. 93-150.

<sup>4</sup> For the history of Ibadism and its role in shaping the history of Oman, see John C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).



nineteenth century, Oman culminated its power and was in control of an extensive empire. This empire included Oman, parts of Persia, parts of Asia, the Eastern coast of Africa and some islands in the Red Sea.<sup>5</sup>

We are told by Samuel Miles that the first European to set foot on Oman was Nearchus, the admiral of Alexander the Great, in 326 B.C. When passing along the north coast of Oman, Nearchus discovered 'Cape Maceta', or the Cape of Musandum, and heard from the pilot of a 'great Omani emporium', which probably was Sohar. The information that Nearchus collected about this area led Alexander to order him to circumnavigate Arabia, but this dream went down with the death of Alexander in Babylon.<sup>6</sup> The next European traveller who visited Oman was Marco Polo, the famous Italian traveller, in 1272. He described the most permanent cities of the country at that time: Hormuz, Dhufar and Qalhat. He found Hormuz 'very beautiful' and 'eminently commercial'. Dufar had a 'good port' whose most important exports were Arabian horses and frankincense, and Qalhat was distinguished by its harbour, which was a stopping port for many trading ships from India. Marco Polo does not provide us with information about the people of Oman or their manners and customs. The few pages he devotes to the country are mainly concerned with its trade and climate.<sup>7</sup> Between Marco Polo and until the Portuguese occupation of Oman in the sixteenth century, little new was learned about the country in Europe. In 1507, Afonso Dalboquerque, known as the Portuguese Mars, led his fleet to conquer the Omani shores, capturing the strategic cities

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<sup>5</sup> Xavier Billecocq, *Oman: Twenty-Five Centuries of Travel Writing* (Relations Internationals, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, p. 8. After Alexander's death, Nearchus wrote a book on his expeditions, known as *The Periplus of the Erythean*. This work was lost, but the Greek author Arrian of Nicomedia quoted passages from it in his book *Indica*. The account of Nearchus' adventures is told by an Englishman, Dr. William Vincent, in his work *The Voyage of Nearchus from the Indus to the Euphrates* (London: [no.pub], 1797). 'Book IV' of this work is related to the 'Gulph of Persia' and includes Nearchus' voyage along the Omani coast.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. by William Marsden (London: J. M. Dent, 1946), pp. 63-69 and pp. 404-407.

of Hormuz, Qalhat, and Muscat. In his *Commentaries*, he told the West about the wealth of Hormuz, asserting that 'the world is a ring, and the jewel in it is Ormuz'. He found Muscat, before he destroyed it, a 'very elegant town, with fine houses'.<sup>8</sup> Although his biography is more concerned with the Portuguese military expeditions and conquests of Africa, India, Oman, and the 'Persian Gulf', he shed significant light on the geography and commerce of the coastal area of Oman in the sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The Portuguese remained in Oman for a hundred and fifty years, until they were expelled by the Omanis in 1650.<sup>10</sup> The fall of their dominance led other European powers, notably the British, Dutch and French, to extend their interests in the area, so that European knowledge of Oman became gradually more and more. However, the British liaison with Oman, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as we shall see later, was closer than any other European country. The development of Omani-British relations led to an increasing number of British travellers who visited Oman and wrote about its people, geography, history and culture.

The ultimate goal of this study is to explore the images of Oman developed within British travel writing from 1800 to 1970. In British travellers' representations, I locate Oman as a place, a people and a culture. Precisely, I am interested in looking at their attitudes, both positive and negative, to every aspect of life in Oman. I also hope to contribute to the literary criticism of Western travel literature on the Middle East with a new perspective. Unlike Edward Said and his advocates, who homogenise Western discourse on the Middle East, in my project I propose that British travel writing on

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<sup>8</sup> See *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, trans. by Walter De Gray Birch, 4 vols (London: Hakluyt Society, 1884), I, p.80, and IV, p. 186.

<sup>9</sup> For the importance of the Portuguese archives and sources to the Omani history, see C. F. Beckingham, 'Some Notes on the Portuguese in Oman', *The Journal of Oman Studies*, 6, part 1 (1983), 13-19.

<sup>10</sup> It must be mentioned here that the Portuguese' occupation of Oman was limited to the littoral area only; the Interior remained free of their dominance. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the *Commentaries* are devoid of information about the natives of Inner Oman. For the history of the Portuguese in Oman, see Ahmed Hamoud al-Maamiry, *Omani-Portuguese History* (New Delhi: Lancers, 1982).



Oman is much more heterogeneous, ambiguous and discontinuous. My thesis argues that British travel writing on Oman is neither homogenously biased nor impartial, but implies a mixture of diverse attitudes, depending on many factors such as the travellers' background, motive of visit, length of stay, time of visit, and kind of people encountered.

The scholarship of Western travel literature on the Middle East is polarized by two trends, the historical and the theoretical. The former is almost a documentary approach, in which the lion's share of the work involves summarising the traveller's life, the time of the journey, the names of the places travelled through, the peoples met, and the course of the journey.<sup>11</sup> The latter is concerned with textual analysis of discourse. Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), travel literature has been used in different epistemological realms to deconstruct Western discourse and unveil the methods the Europeans have used to see and picture 'other' races in the East. Said, and many of his followers, consider Western travel writing on the Middle East as a not 'historically innocent' source, and, thus, they criticise Western travellers as being 'imperialists' and 'racists'.<sup>12</sup> Since the 1980s and with the advent of postcolonial theory in the 1990s, this

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<sup>11</sup> Noteworthy examples of this approach are: David George Hogarth, *The Penetration of Arabia: A Record of the Development of Western Knowledge Concerning the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1904); Reginald Hugh Kiernan, *The Unveiling of Arabia: The Story of Arabian Travel and Discovery*, (London: Harrap, 1937); Robin Fedden, *English Travellers in the Near East* (London: Longmans, 1958); Zahra Freeth and H. V. F. Winstone, *Explorers of Arabia: From Renaissance to Victorian Era* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978); Peter Brent, *Far Arabia: Explorers of Myth*, (London: Quartett Books, 1979); Robin Bidwell, *Travellers in Arabia* (Reading: Grant Publishing, 1994); Andrew Taylor, *Travelling the Sands: Sagas of Exploration in the Arabian Peninsula* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> In Chapter one, I offer an extensive discussion of the Orientalist debate. I would mention, here, that Said's influence upon students of travel writing on the Middle East is increasingly manifest. Several theses and dissertations written in British, American, and Canadian universities after *Orientalism*'s publication have taken up Said's approach. For example, consider these works: Wissal Issa, 'Aspects of Orientalism: Four English Writers—Burton, Blunt, Flecker and T. E. Lawrence' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Reading University, 1986); Naimi, M. N., 'T. E. Lawrence and the Orientalist Tradition' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Essex, 1991); Donald Paul Nurse, 'An Amateur Barbarian: The Life and Career of Sir Richard Francis Burton, 1821—1890' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 1999); Abdul Mawjoud Rageh Dardary, 'Cultural Alterity, Euro-centrism, and Islamism: Travel Literature and the Construction of Misr/Egypt' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2000); Melissa Lee Miller, 'The Imperial Feminine: Victorian Women Travelers in Late Nineteenth-Century Egypt' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Kent State University, 2000).



trend has culminated in a situation in which criticism of travel writing has become obsessed by absolute binaries such as 'West' and 'East', 'European' and 'Other', 'colonizer' and 'colonized', 'us' and 'them', etc.

I employ in my thesis an amalgam of three approaches; documentary, descriptive, and analytical. Because most of the texts under discussion have not been studied in any context, I find it necessary to devote space to the traveller's background, bibliographical notes of his works, and a résumé of his journeys in Oman. Also, the reader will see that I devote much space to several quotations from British travelogues. This descriptive approach is needed for tracing, as much as possible, British representations of Oman throughout the period determined in this thesis, while the analytical approach is employed for challenging Said's project.

In order to follow changes in travellers' attitudes and images from a generation to another, I treat their texts chronologically. Moreover, I situate the travellers' attitudes within their historical context because I argue that considering the time when the texts were produced is a crucial element for understanding them. Within this methodology, I accept, for example, various British travellers' criticisms of the 'backwardness' of Oman during the reign of Said bin Taymur from 1932 to 1970, because this regime did its utmost to isolate Oman from the outside world, preventing Omani people from exposure to many basics of life. However, I reject their sweeping generalizations that all the inhabitants of Sahil Oman were 'pirates' during the last decades of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, while they give a cold shoulder to those European privateers and corsairs who infested the Indian Ocean at that time, as we shall see later in chapter two of this thesis.

This study opens by reviewing literary criticism of Western travel writing on the Middle East. Chapter one aims to achieve two main things: first, to present several

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images of the East and its peoples as perceived within Western travel writings from different points of view. This requires reviewing the most relevant studies that have been concerned with representations of the East and, particularly, the Middle East in the narratives of Western travellers. This will enable the present study to compare some representations of Oman in British travel writing with such images of other areas in the Middle East. Second, and most significantly, this chapter aims to discuss the Orientalist debate over Western travel literature about the Middle East, in order to defend the chosen perspective of the present study. To reach these two objectives, I will divide the relevant studies of the subject into three categories. The first category is represented by Edward Said and his advocates such as Rana Kabbani and Mohammed AL-Taha (Said and Saidians) in works such as: *Orientalism* (1978), *Imperial Fictions* (1986) and *The Orient and Three Victorian Travellers* (1989). The second category is represented by those who took up the challenge of Said's perspective (Anti-Saidians). I have chosen for this trend two works: Syrine Chafic Hout's *Viewing Europe From The Out Side* (1994) and Kathryn Ann Sampson's *The Romantic Literary Pilgrimage to the Orient* (1999). The third category is represented by those who embraced a middle way between Said and his opponents (Middle-of-the-road). The chosen works of this group are: Mohamed Javadi's *Iran Under Western Eyes* (1984), Van de Bilt's *Proximity And Distance* (1985), and John Spencer Dixon's *Representations of the East in English and French Travel Writing 1798-1882* (1991). These studies will be reviewed chronologically in each category, and then each category will be followed by a discussion of its perspectives.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The criteria for choosing these studies are twofold. Firstly, they are concerned, at different levels, with European travel writing, fictitious and real, on the Middle East. The concept of Orientalism has been applied to poetry, fine art, history and other disciplines; hence it is necessary to limit the examination of this concept to a particular area. Secondly, these studies represent different approaches to western discourses on the Orient. Said's project in *Orientalism* is no longer the solo approach used to look at these discourses. Some of these studies are published and some of them are still unpublished doctoral theses. My focus on the works that have dealt with representations of the Middle East only, is the reason for this variety.



Chapter two seeks, firstly, to outline the initial contact between Oman and Britain throughout history in order to locate British travel writing about Oman within its historical context, and, secondly, to survey and discuss the images of Oman that are conveyed through the writings of British travellers who went to the area for a short time and wrote accounts, which are scattered in several journals and books. The main point in common between these travellers is that their writings do not offer a comprehensive view of Oman and its culture because they did not go beyond the coastal area, and their observations were, therefore, confined to the borders and their inhabitants.

Chapter three is devoted to travellers who explored the Interior<sup>14</sup> of Oman, such as James Raymond Wellsted who travelled from 1835 to 1837, Samuel Barrett Miles from 1874 to 1885, and Bertram Sidney Thomas from 1924 to 1931. Unlike the first group of travellers discussed in chapter two, these men journeyed in Oman extensively beyond Muscat and the shores. Although they arrived in different historical moments, a common feature of their writings is that they reflect their association with different types of people in Oman and provide wider observations on the country. Another common feature of their accounts is that the travellers commenced their journeys through Oman while holding different political positions. Wellsted, for example, was a lieutenant in the East India Company; Miles was a British political agent at Muscat and Thomas was prime minister or *Wazir* to the Sultan of Muscat and Oman.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a very distinctive type of adventure: the race, among British travellers, to explore the Empty Quarter, or al-Ruba al-Khali. This huge and mysterious desert was a challenge to Europeans, but British travellers managed to cross this sea of sands from coast to coast. They came back overwhelmed by its fascinating silence. Bertram Thomas made the first crossing from

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<sup>14</sup> Although this geographical term is applied, now, to a specific district in Oman, it used to mean, at least in the minds of European travellers, all parts of the country except Muscat or the coastal area and the Empty Quarter.

south to north in 1931, followed by Harry St. John Philby, who traversed the north-western part of the desert in 1932, and Wilfred Thesiger, who crossed the same sands twice during 1946-1948. Chapter four is devoted to the works of Thomas and Thesiger, who both journeyed in the Empty Quarter, from Dhufar in the south of Arabia to Qatar in the north.<sup>15</sup>

From 1950 to 1970, another era of exploration took place, ending the traditional journeys in Oman. The use of motor vehicles instead of animals, and travel either for political purposes or for oil, are the main aspects of this era. Unlike their predecessors, travellers of this time did not go to the country inspired by 'the lure of the unknown'. Instead, they were employed in Oman by either the Sultan of Muscat or the petroleum companies. Edward Henderson is one of the British travellers who represents this age. He came to Sahil Oman in 1948 in the service of the Petroleum Development Trucial Coast, an international British run-company. Prior to 1956, he undertook several expeditions in trucks searching for oil fields and acting as a British diplomat. His book *Arabian Destiny* (1999) describes very important political events that happened in that period and provides information about tribal customs and history. In addition, it is a story about the discovery of oil and the consequences for the region.<sup>16</sup> From January 1963 to July 1964, David Gwynne-James served with the Sultan of Muscat's Armed Forces. His first book, *Letters from Oman* (2001), is founded on letters to his future wife Charmian Nevill; they were written during his three months' Arabic language learning in Aden, and during his secondment to the Sultan's Armed Forces in Oman.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> I will exclude Philby in this study because his travels in the Empty Quarter were limited to the north-western part, which lies in Saudi Arabia, and his companions were also from that area.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Henderson, *Arabian Destiny: The Complete Autobiography* (Dubai: Motivate, 1999). This book was first published in London by Quartet in 1988 with the title, *This Strange Eventful History: Memoirs of Earlier Days in the UAE and Oman*.

<sup>17</sup> *Letters from Oman: A Snapshot of Feudal Times as Oil Signals Change* (UK: Blackwater Books, 2001) is the first and only edition of the book so far. It is worth noting here that Gwynne-James, as he claims, did not think about writing a book during his service in Aden and Oman. Only, later after 36 years, he decided to collect his letters in a book.

Ian Skeet was in Oman from 1966 to 1968 employed by Shell as liaison officer for Petroleum Development Oman (PDO). He travelled widely through the country providing many details about its geography and history. In his book *Muscat and Oman* (1974), he painted portraits of Muscat, Mutrah, the Interior, the Batinah, the Sharquiya, the Dakhira and the desert. Since Sultan Said bin Taimur, the ruler of what was known as 'Muscat and Oman', was working hard to keep the country remote and prevent outsiders from seeing what was happening within its borders, Skeet's narration of events and life in Oman during that time is of extreme significance.<sup>18</sup> Chapter five is concerned with the works of these three travellers.

The period from 1800 to 1970 is chosen because the first official contact between Britain and Oman was in 1800, when an important treaty was signed to declare the intention that 'the friendship of the two states may remain unshaken to the end of time, and till the sun and moon have finished their revolving career'.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the presence of Sayyid Said Bin Sultan as the ruler of Oman in 1807 strengthened this liaison. His open policy and contact with Europeans made Muscat a main *entrepot* on the route to India. As we shall see in the ensuing chapters, British travellers have flocked increasingly to Oman since that time. The year 1970 was chosen as the end of the scope of this study because after this year Oman moved into another era. Since 1970 when Sultan Qaboos ascended to the throne, life in Oman has changed dramatically. The discovery of oil and changes in the regime have contributed to make Oman a modern state and more open to the external world. Now, the roads are perfectly paved

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<sup>18</sup> *Muscat and Oman: The End of an Era* was first published in London in 1974 by Faber & Faber, then reprinted in 1975 by Travel Book Club. Ian Skeet visited Oman again in 1990, under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Information to write a follow-through volume of his *Muscat and Oman*. Relying on official documents and interviews more than his experience, Skeet published his second work *Oman: Politics and Development* (London: Macmillan, 1992), which recounts the development of the Sultanate of Oman from 1970 to 1990.

<sup>19</sup> For the full text of this treaty, see *Arabian Gulf Intelligence: Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government*, ed. by R. Hughes Thomas, new series, no. 24 (Cambridge: The Oleander Press, 1985), pp.248-250.



for motor vehicles, the hotels are numerous and comfortable, travel agencies have replaced camel caravans and Bedouin companions, the inaccessible Inner Oman is quite open to foreigners, the 'unknown people' of southern Oman have been 'discovered', and the dangerous Empty Quarter has been 'penetrated'. Thus, the curiosity of exploration, the allusion of untrodden paths, the lure of the unknown, and the risk of adventure that imbued travel writing in the past began gradually to vanish after 1970. In short, travel to Oman after 1970 became a kind of tourism. In this context, I would agree with Paul Fussell, who differentiates between two concepts, travel and tourism. According to him, travel is related to hardship and risk, unlike tourism, which implies relaxation and security. He puts the distinction as follows:

As a form of intensified, heightened experience, travel differs from tourism in being not relaxing and comfortable and consoling. The word of course derives from travail, and travel is less like the vacationing which tourism resembles than like a quest for a new kind of strenuousness. It is a laborious adventure amidst strange evil as well as strange good.<sup>20</sup>

Elsewhere, Fussell also argues that there is difference between exploration and tourism, asserting that 'if the explorer moves toward the risks of the formless and the unknown, the tourist moves toward the security of pure cliché'.<sup>21</sup> Although I have no intention to make light of travel writing on Oman after 1970, it is necessary to mention that it more likely belongs to 'tourism', as defined by Fussell, and deserves a separate study.

The significance of the current study lies in the significance of British travel writing itself to Oman in that it documents the culture and history of the country. Because, perhaps, of Oman's isolation and internal wars, seldom have Arabs and Omani chroniclers paid attention to writing about their culture. The most important Omani

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20 Paul Fussell, *Thank God for the Atom Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), pp.127-128.

21 Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary traveling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.39.

historical source, albeit devoted to the history of Imamate, was written in 1913 and published only in 1927 in Cairo. Assalimi, the author of the book, complains in his introduction about the lack of Omani historical sources, asserting that 'Omani scholars did not concern themselves with history' because they were mainly interested in religious affairs.<sup>22</sup> The ultimate contribution of British travellers to Omani culture is that they described everyday life in Oman, which is almost neglected in the few Omani historical works. In British travel accounts, we read about several interesting themes: hospitality, contentment, tolerance, slaves, sorcerers, men's and women's clothing, hair fashions, greetings, habits of eating, the habit of sipping coffee, the Sultan's palace and harem, the excessive heat of Muscat, the physical appearance of the natives, the splendour of Hormuz, the narrow and dirty bazaars of Mutrah, the local wine of Al-Jabal Al-Akdhar, the tedious bargains of Ibri, the *Zutt* or 'Arab gipsies', tribal quarrels, the traditional Omani system of learning, traditional Omani architecture, the process of cooking and drying dates, hand-loom, the manufacture of porous clay vessels for cooling water, ordnances fired off for salutation, camel caravans, camel chants, the cult of the *Zar* and its ceremony, customs and folklore of Oman, the particular Omani irrigation system of Aflaj, superstitions, using cauterization and incantations as treatment, Devil Dancing in Dhufar, hairstyles of the inhabitants of Dhufar, circumcision rites, exorcism, spirits, sacrifices, the tradition of curing diseases by burning frankincense and practicing blood sacrifice, beliefs in oaths upon shrines, the Bedouins' belief in the absolute will of Allah, the practice of using urine or vomit of the camel to cure diseases or, as a hair-wash to kill vermin, the Bedouins' childish manners and simplicity, their love of the camel, their sense of humour, their ability to read tracks, their greed and intrusiveness, their disputes, their patience, bravery, tolerance,

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<sup>22</sup> Abdullah bin Humaid Assalimi, *Tuhafat Al-A'ayan Bisirat Ahel Oman* [in Arabic] (Muscat: Maktabet Al-Istqama), p. 4.

generosity and nobility, and natural phenomena in the Empty Quarter, such as singing sands and the devouring sands of Umm Assamim.

All these themes and details about the everyday life of Oman narrated in British travel accounts, I am sure most Omani intellectuals would agree, have been neglected in Arabic sources related to Oman. Even some of these themes were considered taboo by Omani chroniclers, as they would not have spoken of subjects such as the 'Zar cult', exorcism or the local wine, which certainly were rejected by Islamic doctrines. Therefore, I hope in my thesis will fill a gap in the cultural history of Oman by tracking the images and descriptions of Omani life in British travel writings.

## Chapter I

### Picturing the Orient: A Survey of Approaches

Colonial discourse theory and post-colonial theory have troubled Edward Said's homogenising views of colonial texts, so that it is possible to characterise the relations of power between the colonised and the coloniser not simply in terms of 'master' and 'slave' and not simply in terms of their success in affirming colonial power.<sup>1</sup>

I have mentioned earlier that literary criticism of travel writing, since the emergence of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, has shifted from documentation to analysis. This chapter offers a detailed review of some selected works which deal with European travelogues on the Middle East. Said and his followers, his opponents, and the scholars who took a middle way will be discussed and compared in terms of their approaches and criticism of some British, French, and American writers who wrote either factual travel accounts or pseudo-travelogues about the Middle East.

#### 1. Said and Saidians

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is among one of the most significant treatises in post-colonial studies. Since it was published in 1978, this highly controversial work has had an ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Mills, *Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p.129.



influence on related disciplines in humanities and the social sciences. Colonial theory, post-colonial studies, women's writing, anthropology, history, geography, tourism and travel literature have all been influenced by it.

The book is an attempt to fuse Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, in terms of the relationship between knowledge and power, and Antonio Gramsci's conception of political and cultural hegemony.<sup>2</sup> Within these two frameworks, Said approaches European writings, particularly British and French, on the Orient from the late 18th century onwards. Western scholars, travellers and politicians who wrote about, taught, and studied the Orient are considered to be *Orientalists* and what they produced is a *discourse* of Orientalism. Said's argument in the book could be briefly sketched as follows:

Firstly, Said provides three interdependent definitions of Orientalism: as an academic tradition: 'Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient [...] either in its specific or in its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism'<sup>3</sup>; as a 'style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"'<sup>4</sup>, and as a

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<sup>2</sup> According to Foucault, knowledge must be described with reference to institutions. Institutions cannot work without the use of power. He claims that power relations are closely attached to human discourse, because 'relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated, nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse'. (Michel Foucault, *Power / knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p.93.

Similarly, the Gramscian concept of 'hegemony' is depicted as an equilibrium between intellectuals and government. In a letter of September, 7, 1931, Gramsci states: 'This research will also concern the concept of the State, which is usually thought of as political society—i.e., a dictatorship or some other coercive apparatus used to control the masses in conformity with a given type of production and economy—and not as a balance between political society and civil society, by which I mean the hegemony of one social group over the entire nation, exercised through so-called private organizations like the Church, trade unions, or schools. For it is above all in civil society that intellectuals exert their influence. Benedetto Croce, for example, is a kind of lay Pope and an extremely efficient instrument of hegemony, even if sometimes he seems to come up against the government in power.' (Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, ed. by Lynne Lawner (London: Quartet Books, 1979), p.204.)

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p.2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.2.



'Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient'.<sup>5</sup>

Guided by his definitions of Orientalism, Said gives a list of three categories of Orientalists. One is the writer who is in the Orient to accomplish an official task or 'who considers his residence a form of scientific observation'. Edward William Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, says Said, is a manifest example of this category.<sup>6</sup> Another is the writer who starts with the same purpose, but whose individual interests dominate in his work. Said considers Burton's *Pilgrimage to al-Madinah and Meccah* as a good example of this category.<sup>7</sup> The third is the writer who travels to the Orient to satisfy his desire. 'His text therefore is built on a personal aesthetic'. Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* represents this category.<sup>8</sup>

Said argues that Orientalism functions to serve political purposes or, in his words,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>6</sup> Edward William Lane (1801-1876) was a British Egyptologist and a name well known to most of the scholars interested in the studies of the Middle East. His 'masterpiece', *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (first published in London by C. Knight, 1836), is considered to be 'the most remarkable description of a people ever written'. Lane also was the author of other important works: his translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* (first published in London: C. Knight & Co., 1839-41), *Selections from the Kur-an* (first published in London: James Madden and Co., 1843), *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (first published in London: Williams & Norgate, 1863), *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages: Studies from the Thousand and One Nights* (first published in London: Chatto & Windus, 1883), and *Description of Egypt: Notes and Views in Egypt and Nubia, made in the years 1825, --26, --27, and --28* (first published in Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000). For more details, see Leila Ahmed, *Edward W. Lane: A Study of his Life and Works and of British Ideas of the Middle East in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longman, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) was an adventurer, linguist, and scholar. His major contributions to Arabian studies include: *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah*, 2 vols (first published in London: Longmans, 1855), *Unexplored Syria*, 2 vols (first published in London: Tinsley Bros, 1872), translation of *The Kasidah (couplets) of Hajî Aboû El-Yezdî* (first published in London: Bernard Quaritch, 1880), *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments: Now Entitled the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night / with introduction, explanatory notes on the manners and customs of Moslemmen and a terminal essay upon the history of the nights*, 16 vols (first published in London: Kamashastra Society, 1885-88), and translation of *The Perfumed Garden of the Shaykh Nefzawi* (first published in London: Cosmopoli, 1886). For further details, see Edward Rice, *Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton: the Secret Agent who Made the Pilgrimage to Mecca, Discovered the Kama Sutra, and Brought the Arabian Nights to the West* (New York: Scribners, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, pp.157-158. The French painter and poet Gerard de Nerval (1808-1855) travelled to the East, to Cairo, Beirut and Constantinople in 1843. His *Voyage en Orient* (1851) is the result of these adventures. The work appeared in English as *The Women of Cairo: Scenes of Life in the Orient*, trans. by Conrad Elphinstone, 1<sup>st</sup> edn, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1929).



‘to rub culture’s nose in the mud of politics’.<sup>9</sup> The point he is trying to make here is that Orientalism shifted from having a purely academic meaning (as the system of European or Western knowledge about the Orient) to become synonymous with European domination of the Orient. Even the most imaginative writers of their age, men like Flaubert and Nerval were constrained, Said maintains, in what they could say about the Orient.<sup>10</sup> Some British and French travellers are given as examples. Lamartine, Said claims, wrote about himself, and also about France as a power justifying the European occupation of the Orient.<sup>11</sup> Lord Curzon, he adds, always spoke the imperial rhetoric, determining the relationship between Britain and the Orient in terms of ‘possession’. For him, Said argues, the Empire was not merely an ‘object of ambition’ but ‘first and foremost, a great historical and political and sociological fact’.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Said suggests that when any of the Orientalists or ‘imperial agents’, such as T. E. Lawrence<sup>13</sup>, St. John Philby<sup>14</sup>, and William Gifford Palgrave<sup>15</sup>,

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<sup>9</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.179. Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869) was a French poet who visited the Middle East; Palestine and Syria, during the years 1832-1833. This journey led him to write *Voyage en Orient* (1835). The book appeared in English as *A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land; Comprising Recollections, Sketches, and Reflections, Made During a Tour in the East*, trans. by Miss Hill (London, 1837).

<sup>12</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 213. George Nathaniel Curzon (1859-1925) was a British Conservative politician, and served as Viceroy of India. He was a definite advocator of Empire and Britain’s imperial mission. He travelled widely around the world, visiting India, Ceylon, Persia, Turkey, Afghanistan, China, Japan and Korea. Curzon visited Oman in 1892 during his survey of the ‘Persian Gulf’, and his travel account of Muscat is available in his book *Persia and the Persian Question*, as we shall see later in the next chapter. About Curzon, see Nayana Goradia, *Lord Curzon: The Last of the British Moghuls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Edward Lawrence (1888-1935). Generally known as Lawrence of Arabia, he became a legend for his role as British Military liaison to the Arab Revolt during the First World War. His story of the rebellion is told in his main works, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*, which was privately printed in 1926 and published commercially in 1935, and *Revolt in the Desert*, which came up in 1927. Lawrence’s impact on British travellers who succeeded him to Arabia is manifest; all cited him in their own travelogues. Bertram Thomas, Wilfred Thesiger and other belated travellers to Oman were also inspired by Lawrence’s works, as we shall see later in this thesis. There are a number of biographies and critical books on Lawrence. See, for instance, Harold Orlans, *T.E. Lawrence: Biography of a Broken Hero* (London: McFarland, 2002).



among others, had to decide whether their loyalties and sympathies leaned to the Orient or to the West, they always chose the later.<sup>16</sup>

Said argues that Orientalism has yielded a hostile view of Orientals, Muslims and Arabs. He believes that 'for Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma'.<sup>17</sup> He attempts to support this notion with several examples from Western writings. For instance, in Lord Cromer's *Modern Egypt*, Said points out that Orientals and Arabs are depicted as naive, 'devoid of energy and initiative', given to excessive adulation, intrigue and unkindness to animals; Orientals are pictured as innate liars, 'lethargic and suspicious', and as possessing manners exactly opposite to the Anglo-Saxon race.<sup>18</sup> Citing Norman Daniel's *Islam and the West*, Said claims that since Mohammed was viewed as the Prophet of a false Revelation, he

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<sup>14</sup> Harry St. John Philby (1885–1960) was one of most legendary British explorers of the Empty Quarter in Arabia. Having been a head of the British political mission to the Central Arabia in 1917, he undertook extensive journeys in the western part of Arabia and became the first European to visit the southern regions of Nejd. In 1930 he left the British 'foreign service' and converted to Islam, taking the name of Hajj Abdullah. He served also as a chief adviser to King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia. Philby contributed to the scholarship of Arabia with several works including: *The Heart of Arabia: A Record of Travel & Exploration* (London: Constable, 1922), *Arabia of the Wahhabis* (London: Constable, 1928), *The Empty Quarter: Being a Description of the Great South Desert of Arabia Known as Rub 'al Khali* (London: Constable, 1933), *The Background of Islam: Being a Sketch of Arabian History in Pre-Islamic Times* (Alexandria: Whitehead, Morris, 1947), *Arabian Highlands* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1952), and *Forty Years in the Wilderness* (London: R. Hale, 1957). Further information is available in Elizabeth Monroe, *Philby of Arabia* (London: Faber, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> William Gifford Palgrave (1826-1888) was a British missionary, traveller and diplomat. In 1853 he was sent to Syria as Jesuit missionary, and during 1862–3 he travelled widely through the Arabian Peninsula disguised as a Syrian doctor and merchant. He was accused of being a spy for Napoleon III, arranging the political ground for the French to build the Suez Canal. He returned to England in 1863 finishing his crossing of Arabia from Syria to Oman. This adventure is written about in his popular work, *Narrative of a Year's Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia, 1862-1863*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1865). For more details, see Allan Mea, *Palgrave of Arabia: The Life of William Gifford Palgrave, 1826-88* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.59.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.38. It is true that Cromer made several dichotomies between the West and the East, the Europeans and the Orientals; 'The European is a close reasoner' but the Oriental's reasoning 'is of most slipshod description'; the European is 'talkative', and 'active in mind', while the Easterner is 'grave and silent'; if the European 'spurns both the flatterer and the person who invites flattery', the Oriental is prone to 'fulsome flattery'. Most of his criticism of Egyptian manners and customs was far from objective. In fact, Cromer boasted, in several pages of his work, of what he called 'the might, the resources, and the sterling national qualities of the Anglo-Saxon race'. See Evelyn Baring Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1908), II, pp. 146-1167.



became in Western eyes the paradigm of 'lechery, debauchery, sodomy, and a whole battery of assorted treacheries'.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the Koran did not escape hostile attack by western writers, he argues. Thomas Carlyle, Said claims, asserts that the Koran was 'a wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite insupportable stupidity, in short'.<sup>20</sup> Said goes on to argue that even in modern Western films and television, the Arab is viewed either as lecherous or as a terrorist. He is shown as lustful, but basically sadistic and treacherous. Slave trader, camel driver, and colorful miscreant: 'these are some traditional Arab roles in cinema', which are supported, he claims, by academics whose business is the study of the Arab Near East.<sup>21</sup> Nor does Western hostility towards the Orient stop at this level, he points out. Perhaps the most odd aspect of this 'truth' is that Arabic as a language is a 'dangerous ideology'. Said offers E. Shouby's essay about the impact of Arabic on the psychology of the Arabs as a good example of this view.<sup>22</sup> Such images and ideas about Islam and Arabs,

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<sup>19</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 62. Norman Daniel refers, particularly, to Peter of Poitiers, a French theologian in the twelve century, whose 'polemic' tendency against Islam led him to picture the Prophet Mohammed as "a robber, a murderer, a traitor and an adulterer". See Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993), pp. 88-89.

<sup>20</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 152. What is worth mentioning here is that Thomas Carlyle criticises the translated Koran rather than the original source. He admits that Arabs find the Koran 'rhythmic' but says this 'great point' 'has been lost in the Translation'. It does not seem that his vision of the book came out of antagonism, as Said asserts. Carlyle believes the Koran is 'a bona-fide book' and criticises some Europeans who represented it as 'a mere bundle of juggleries'. 'Sincerity, in all senses, seems to me the merit of the Koran', he declares. Moreover, he tries to dismiss the image that Mohammed was a 'sensual man'. He asserts that 'we shall err widely if we consider this man as a common voluptuary, intent mainly on base enjoyments,—nay on enjoyments of any kind'. See Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus, On Heroes Hero-Worships and the Heroic in History* (London: J.M. Dent, 1914), pp. 299-305.

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 286-288. Although Said does not provide any instance of this cinematic portrait of Arabs, Sari J Nasir, who studied this theme more widely, produces many examples. Nasir argues that in films such as *Desert Pursuit* (Monogram, 1952), *Exodus* (United Artists, 1960), *Lawrence of Arabia* (Columbia, 1962), and *Khartoum* (United Artists, 1966), Arabs were portrayed as 'villainous' and 'dressed in flowing robes; they were fierce looking and possessing alien values contrary to western beliefs'. See Sari J. Nasir, *The Arabs and The English* (London: Longman, 1979), p. 159.

<sup>22</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 320. Shouby is convinced that the separation between the 'literary Arabic ideal-self' and the 'colloquial Arabic real self', together with some linguistic aspects of Arabic language such as 'overassertion' and 'exaggeration', is the main reason for the 'conspicuous contradiction of Arab personality

Said maintains, became an integral part of the very traditions of Orientalist study during the nineteenth century, and gradually became a 'standard component' of most Orientalist performance, from generation to generation.<sup>23</sup>

Said also argues that the principal ideology of Orientalism is the ultimate and systematic difference between West and Orient, or as he puts it: 'the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident'.<sup>24</sup> Said argues that Balfour and Cromer typically used many terms to express this distinction. 'The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal"'.<sup>25</sup> Said claims that when Britain during the nineteenth century required its administrators to retire from British colonies once they became fifty-five years old, that was because 'the Oriental was not allowed to see a Westerner as he aged and degenerated, just as no Westerner needed ever to see himself, mirrored in the eyes of the subject race as anything but a vigorous, rational, ever-alert young Raj'.<sup>26</sup> Said believes that race theory, human classification, Darwinism, anthropology, philology and the need for colonial territories were always intended to raise the European races to dominion over non-Europeans.<sup>27</sup>

Rana Kabbani, in her *Imperial Fictions* (1986), follows Said in his argument about Orientalism, claiming that Western travelogues on the Orient were 'part of Orientalism that

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structure'. See E. Shouby, 'The Influence of the Arabic Language on the Psychology of the Arabs', in *Readings in Arabic Middle Eastern Societies and Cultures*, ed. by Abdulla M. Lutfiyya and Charles W. Churchill (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 688-703 (p. 702).

<sup>23</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 260.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 232. It must be mentioned here that this argument is concerned only with Said's project in *Orientalism* (1978). Said, in his 'afterward' to the 1995 edition of *Orientalism*, moves beyond some of his generalisations. He articulates 'nowhere do I argue that Orientalism is evil, or sloppy, or uniformly the same in the work of each and every Orientalist.' (p.342). Subsequently, he asserts 'I genuinely admire like Edward Lane and Gustave Flaubert, who were fascinated by Egypt' (p. 336).



abetted empire'.<sup>28</sup> Although neither the problem of the study nor the questions are stated in her book, one can figure out from the introduction that Kabbani is concerned with the critique of prejudices of Western travellers and their misconceptions of the Orient. To investigate this assumption, she says that she 'has been selective rather than exhaustive' in her choice of texts throughout the thesis.<sup>29</sup>

Kabbani makes several claims in her book. She assumes that nineteenth-century Britain, increasingly, produced a considerable amount of travel writing, in a frantic attempt to know the world that was possible for colonization.<sup>30</sup> In this respect, she discusses the idea of travellers' disguise arguing that disguise was used as a political means of penetrating Eastern society in order to gain information. She claims that when Burton was in Mecca disguised as a wandering Pasha, an Indian came near to him and, in patriotic enthusiasm, informed him of the protests about to be organized against the British in the Indian provinces. Burton, she claims, immediately telegraphed this news to British headquarters.<sup>31</sup>

Kabbani also maintains that the West pictured the East as a dangerous region, where Islam prospered and inferior races spread. One of the strategies of this polemic was to show contempt for Mohammed where possible. He was portrayed as an 'arch-seducer, who wore purple, coloured his lips, and delighted in scented things and coition'. The Muslims, she asserts, were themselves seen as a hideous race, and depicted as 'black, dog-headed and

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<sup>28</sup> Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* (London: Pandora, 1994), p. 10. She declares in her Notes that she relies on Said's approach: 'I am indebted to Professor Said's definition of Orientalism as a method of cataloguing the Orient that was inextricably linked to the imperialistic world-view', p.141.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.12.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.91.



ugly'.<sup>32</sup> The medieval image of Islam, she maintains, was full of 'mythomania' and the 'we-they' binary of European visions was buttressed by the literature of fictive or real travellers such as Mandeville and Marco Polo.<sup>33</sup> Renaissance England, therefore, came into the discursive image of the East from the Middle Ages, as it came into fear of Muslims.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, she argues that the strongest motive that incited Englishmen to travel to the East was religion. They travelled searching for the roots of Christianity, which, with the advent of scientific discovery and new materialism, had come to be in danger. Among these 'Pilgrims', she argues, Charles Doughty was the most enthusiastic and bigoted.<sup>35</sup> His sense of religious superiority, Kabbani asserts, was accompanied by his disdain for Islam. During his journey, he met with an Italian traveller who had converted to Islam and read the Koran. Doughty, influenced by his religious conceit, responded discontentedly: 'It amazed me that one born in the Roman country, and under the name of Christ, should waive these prerogatives, to become the brother of Asiatic barbarians in a fond religion!'<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, she asserts that Europe was fascinated by an unreal Orient, the Orient of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Sir John Mandeville is the fourteenth-century English traveller and author of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. The book was originally written in French, but it became very famous and was translated into English and a number of other languages. It is the Mandeville's narrative of his journeys in Jerusalem, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, China, and other places. Although it is true, as Kabbani maintains, that Mandeville had some misunderstandings about Islam, his narrative is free of the Medieval hostility towards the Muslims. In chapter 15 Mandeville describes the manners and customs of the Muslims, providing information, though some of it untrue, about the Prophet and the Koran. His picture of the Muslims is that 'they are very devout and honest in their law'. See *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. by C.W.R.D. Moseley (London: Penguin, 1983). P. 108.

<sup>34</sup> Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, p.17.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Montagu Doughty (1843-1926) was an eminent English explorer and poet. In 1870 he travelled in Palestine, Syria and Egypt. Having learnt Arabic in Damascus, he set out to Mecca joining a caravan on pilgrimage. He spent two years nearly touring through Central Arabia. The narrative of his adventures, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, was published originally by Cambridge University Press in 1888. The work was admired by most of the British travellers to Arabia, especially T. E. Lawrence, who wrote an introduction of the edition of 1921 considering it as 'a Bible of its kind'. A full biography of Doughty is available in: Andrew Taylor, *God's Fugitive: The Life of C.M. Doughty* (London: HarperCollins, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, pp. 103-106. See also Charles Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 2 vols (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), II, p. 66.

the *Arabian Nights*, the Orient that 'promised a sexual space, a voyage away from the self, an escape from the dictates of the bourgeois morality of the metropolis'. The European, she adds, was led into the East by sexuality, by personifying it as a woman or a young boy, as Edward Lane portrayed his first sight of Egypt: 'As I approached the shore, I felt like an Eastern bridegroom, about to lift the veil of his bride'.<sup>37</sup> Kabbani argues that the *Arabian Nights* engendered a 'literary *frisson*' that influenced English fiction. The Oriental tales became a favourite allegory for poets, novelists and travel writers, or a structure for romanticism. Thus, she is convinced, the Romantic's Orient was an imaginary space, with no connection to the real East. Therefore, poverty and social misery were absent from the European mythical Orient.<sup>38</sup> Beside this, she argues, Europeans associated the Orient with a perverted sexuality. Lane, she claims, always spoke of the prostitution of Egyptian women, and 'their uncontrollable licentiousness'.<sup>39</sup> Kabbani compares Lane's attitude with Burton's because she believes that they shared the same biases. Lane, she continues, considered the behaviour of Eastern women as incomparably licentious. He claimed that even European prostitutes could not match the Egyptian woman's scurrility: 'things are named, and subjects talked of by the most genteel women, that many prostitutes in our country would probably abstain from mentioning'. Burton, she argues, shared Lane's view that perverted sexuality and 'tribadism' were behaviours that existed as a matter of course in the East:

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<sup>37</sup> Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, p. 67. See also Leila Ahmed, *Edward W. Lane: A Study of his Life and Works and of British Ideas of the Middle East in nineteenth Century* (London: Longman, 1978), p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.29-30. Paradoxically, Kabbani elsewhere in her thesis criticises some Europeans' tendency to depict the poverty and misery of some Arab world countries. Her attack of Elias Canetti's *The Voices of Marrakish*, here, is clear: 'Morocco for Canetti provides endless images of poverty, disease, sorcery, superstition and sexuality. It is almost as if his eye were searching out the instances of differentness that he could present an audience with, in order to evoke shock, disgust, laughter or pity'. P. 128.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 41. Kabbani is absolutely right in her claim that Edward Lane was haunted by the *Arabian Nights*, which he translated into English in 1839, in his picture of the Egyptian women. Indeed, Lane himself reported that 'some stories of the intrigues of women in "The Thousand and One Night" present faithful pictures of



'The Moslem Harem is a great school for this Lesbian love (which I call Atossan)', says Burton.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, she claims that travel writing of the Victorian period was associated with the new field of anthropology, which in the beginning often served to support the self-esteem of the European by satisfying him that he was the best of human beings.<sup>41</sup> Burton, she suggests, shared his century's dogma that 'Savage Man' a 'term that could incorporate all non-European peoples' was a unique species whose impulse was controlled by sexual desire, beneath the civilization to which the white races had evolved. 'Indeed Burton often spoke of African and Arab man and beast in one breath', says Kabbani.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Burton's view, she asserts, of the Chinese as 'practitioners of bestiality, of lesbianism in hammocks' is only one instance of his more common disdain for non-Europeans: Sindis, Egyptians, Persians, Turks, Arabs, all were classified as degenerate.<sup>43</sup> This sense of separateness that the English felt in dealing with the peoples they travelled amongst, can be extremely exemplified, she asserts, by Lawrence who said: 'I was sent to the Arabs as a stranger, unable to think their thoughts or subscribe to their beliefs [...] If I could not

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occurrences not unfrequent in the modern metropolis of Egypt'. See Edward Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: East-West Publications, 1989), p. 298.

<sup>40</sup> Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, pp. 52-53. Burton said this in his comment on the Arabic word 'Sahákah' meaning lesbian. See Burton, *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments*, vol. II, p. 234.

<sup>41</sup> Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, p. 62.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 63. Having not produced any evidence of this claim from Burton's writing, Kabbani consulted a second source instead for this generalization. Indeed, Burton did not confine the idea of the 'savage man' to the Easterners. Heterogeneously, he applied the idea to different races, including the Europeans. For example, he criticises some British manners in Egypt: 'It would be well for those who sweepingly accuse Easterners of want of gallantry, to contrast this trait of character with the savage scenes of civilisation that take place among the "overlands" at Cairo and Suez. No foreigner could be present for the first time without bearing away the lasting impression that the sons of Great Britain are model barbarians'. See Richard Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah*, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1964), I, p. 210.

<sup>43</sup> Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, p.59.



assume their character, I could at least conceal my own'.<sup>44</sup> In addition, Kabbani, like Said, mentions Doughty's extreme 'hostility' to the Arabs quoting his famous phrase 'The Semites are like a man sitting in a cloaca to the eyes, and whose brows touch heaven'.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, Kabbani claims that Europeans in the East copied each other's testimony to support their common picture of the Orient. Lane's book *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* became a mainstream book that most British travellers read. Lane, she argues, dogmatised many of the traditional western conceptions about the Orientals in his narrative. He considered them to be 'indolent, superstitious, sensually over-indulgent and religiously fanatical'.<sup>46</sup> This inheritance, Kabbani concludes, imbued the bulk of European travel narrative about the East with bias and supposition.<sup>47</sup>

Muhammad Al-Taha, in his thesis, *The Orient And Three Victorian Travellers* (1989), takes up Said's theory, asserting in the preface that the bulk of Victorian travellers to the Middle East portrayed Orientals through the ideology of Empire, which was tainted by European feelings of racial superiority. Al-Taha's main aim is to investigate the travel writing of three Victorian travellers to the Middle East, Alexander William Kinglake<sup>48</sup>,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, pp. 91-92. See also T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*, (London: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 28-29.

<sup>45</sup> Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, p. 108. Although Doughty's image of the Semites, here, is disgusting, the general context of the sentence has nothing to do with 'racism'. In other words, Doughty criticises the fatalistic tendency of some Eastern people who attach their weakness and miserable life to 'heaven' without doing anything. Here, the context of the above sentence is clear:

'The traveller must be himself, in men's eyes, a man worthy to live under the bent of God's heaven, and were it without a religion: he is such who has a clean human heart and long-suffering under his bare shirt; it is enough, and though the way be full of harms, he may travel to the ends of the world. Here is a dead land, whence, if he die not, he shall bring home nothing but a perpetual weariness in his bones. The Semites are like to a man sitting in a cloaca to the eyes, and whose brows touch heaven. Of the great antique humanity of the Semitic desert, there is a moment in every adventure, wherein a man may find to make his peace with them, so he know the Arabs'. See Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, I, p. 95.

<sup>46</sup> Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, p. 39.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 139.

<sup>48</sup> Alexander William Kinglake (1809-1891) was an English historian and traveller. In 1835, while still a student, he toured in the Middle East visiting Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. His adventure was recorded in his prominent work *Eothen*, which was published first anonymously in 1844 and then continued

Richard Burton and William Palgrave. It is to show how the 'ideology of Empire' influenced their works and, therefore, 'limited their actual observations to the extent that they expressed in their literary works on the Orient more of their own ideology than the reality of the Orient'.

In order to demonstrate the above claim, Al-Taha devotes one chapter to each traveller. Regarding Kinglake, he argues that by the time Kinglake began his travels, the notion of Oriental wretchedness and the images of the Arabs derived from *Arabian Nights* was prevalent among fiction writers. Besides, the discourse of the Orient as a European colony had already been initiated. French travellers such as Chateaubriand and Lamartine, he maintains, had already portrayed the Orient as a favourite place of French colonial desire. Moreover, Disraeli's *Tancred* raised the notion Orientals had the ambition to be ruled by the British. Al-Taha asserts that Kinglake subsequently declared this to be 'a strong desire in the Syrian and predicted the occupation of Egypt'.<sup>49</sup>

Al-Taha also claims that the man in Britain in the nineteenth century had a manifest feeling of 'superiority over men of other races and over women and children of his own race'. Therefore, the Arabs were portrayed as a race inferior to the English. Burton's racism, he explains, made him believe that Arabs were 'half-naked bandits' and they should be subjected to the 'British iron rule of law and order'.<sup>50</sup> Al-Taha argues that Burton, like

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in a number of new editions. *Eothen* is, perhaps, the most popular travel book on the Middle East. Jan Morris, in her introduction to the Oxford University Press edition of 1982, maintains that Kinglake for the rest of his life was known as 'Eothen' Kinglake (p. 3).

<sup>49</sup> Muhammad Al-Taha, 'The Orient and Three Victorian Travellers: Kinglake, Burton and Palgrave' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Leicester University, 1989), P. 4. Kinglake, especially, speaks of the Syrian Christians who, he claims, looked eagerly to England as a Christian country that could rid Syria of Mohamed Ali's rule. 'So strong and strenuous was England (Lord Palmerston reigned in those days), that it was a pride and delight for a Syrian Christian to look up and say that the Englishman's faith was his too'. Kinglake, *Eothen*, p. 261.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Taha, 'The Orient and Three Victorian Travellers', p. 3. See also Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah*, I, p. 258. However, Burton does not speak here of Arabs as a race. Rather, his comment is an attack against the Wahhabies in Al-Hijaz.



Kinglake in his expression of the necessity for the British to invade the East, had imperial attitudes. He quotes Burton as having said that Egypt was 'most tempting prize which the East holds out to the ambition of Europe', and imagined British hegemony over Arabia, awaiting impatiently the day of their conquering of the 'mother city of Al-Islam'.<sup>51</sup>

Al-Taha also maintains that William Palgrave was a Jesuit missionary sent to Arabia on a political mission, and his discourse on the Arabs was imbued by both politics and the ideology of the Christian missionary in the nineteenth century.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, he argues, as a political agent of a European power, Palgrave was concerned to support imperial interests in the Arab world. For instance, he adds, in his preface to *Central Arabia*, Palgrave states the special objective of his journey which was 'the desire of bringing the stagnant water of Eastern life into contact with the quickening stream of European progress'.<sup>53</sup> As a missionary, Palgrave had purposely, he maintains, misrepresented Islam by broadcasting the 'bad things'.<sup>54</sup> According to Al-Taha, Palgrave assumed that Arabs could not reach civilization unless they shook themselves free from the grip of Islam:

When the Coran and Mecca shall have disappeared from Arabia, then, and then only, can we seriously expect to see the Arabs assume that place in the ranks of civilization from which Mahomet and his book have, more than any other individual cause, long held him back.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Al-Taha, 'The Orient and Three Victorian Travellers', p. 18. See also Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah*, I, p.114. and II, p. 268. Indeed, Burton puts it overtly that 'it requires not the ken of a prophet to foresee the day when political necessity [...] will compel us to occupy in force the fountain-head of Islam'. See II, p. 231.

<sup>52</sup> Al-Taha, 'The Orient and Three Victorian Travellers', p. 144.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 170. See also William Gifford Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia (1862-1863)*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1865), I, p. vii.

<sup>54</sup> Al-Taha, 'The Orient and Three Victorian Travellers', p. 146.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.182. See also Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia*, I, p. 175.

This cooperation between the missionary and the imperial power is explained by Al-Taha as the former seeing in the latter a bridge to reach the non-Christian countries and a weapon for protecting its activities. And the latter saw in the former a tool for converting the poor natives from their religious and cultural roots, preparing them to perceive the imperialist, the colonizer, as a brother, civilised and superior, rather than enemy and occupier.<sup>56</sup>

After investigating the works of the three Victorian travellers, Al-Taha concludes his thesis by arguing that 'they adopted a personal narrative in a literary form in which they were subjective and selective, rather than objective and reflective'. Their works were addressed to European readers from 'different walks of life'. They did their utmost to secure political interests, while to the common people of Europe, who took Islam to be the enemy of Christians and Europeans, they provided a readily welcomed picture of the abhorrent character of Islam by representing it in a draconian way; and to men of letters, they offered a romantic Orient that could satisfy their imagination.<sup>57</sup>

The arguments sketched above by Said and his followers, are not what I would advocate in my study, and the reason for this is manifold. We can see obviously the polemic aspect of this current in the way that Said and his followers have selected, deliberately, their examples from Orientalist discourses to serve their preconceptions or their visions of Western colonial powers. In other words, I think that this critical current fails to deal with Western travel writings as literary texts that hold possibilities of revealing different visions. Instead, they consider them as political documents, written by French and British political agents in the East. Indeed, when they accuse Western travellers of being 'subjective and selective rather than objective and reflective', as Al-Taha says above, this could apply to themselves as well. Because, as we have seen, Said and his followers present

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<sup>56</sup> Al-Taha, 'The Orient and Three Victorian Travellers', p.170-171.



a negative side of the Western picture of the Orient, though this is not the whole vision, as we shall see later.

Sweeping generalizations form another weakness in this group of studies. For instance, Said's definitions of Orientalism leave no space for other aspects of Western discourses. He claims that 'every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric'.<sup>58</sup> Rana Kabbani, as well, falls in the same trap when she concludes her thesis, as I have already mentioned, that 'the bulk' of Western travel writing about the East is imbued with bias. In this respect, one should argue, in contrast to the generalizations of this group, that Europe was not consistently portrayed as superior to the Orient. Tripta Wahi, for example, asserts that several British writers applied their concepts of prosperity to their own past, and found it too, 'revealed barbarism'.<sup>59</sup> At this point, I will go further to claim that Said's generalizations go beyond accusing Europeans of arrogance to charge Oriental students (such as me, for example) with the same description:

The predictable result of all this is that Oriental students (and Oriental professors) still want to come and sit at the feet of American [or British] Orientalists, and later to repeat to their local audience the clichés I have been characterizing as Orientalist dogmas. Such a system of reproduction makes it inevitable that the Oriental scholar will use his American training to feel superior to his own people because he is able to "manage" the Orientalist system; in his relations with his superiors, the European or American Orientalists, he will remain only a "native informant".<sup>60</sup>

Such a passage does not reveal more than hasty emotional judgments, which are far

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.189.

<sup>58</sup> Said, Edward, p.204.

<sup>59</sup> Tripta Wahi, 'Orientalism: A Critique', *Revolutionary Democracy*, 2, no.1 (1996), available online: <http://revolutionarydemocracy.org/>.

<sup>60</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p.324.

from any accurate, systematic analysis. Nevertheless, Said on several occasions, paradoxically, criticises Orientalists for sweeping generalizations about the East. Many scholars, here, have noticed ambiguity and paradoxes in Said's theory. Ziauddin Sardar points out that Said himself is never too far from the classic trope of Orientalism that he always charges with hostility to Islam. In the *Politics of Dispossession*, Sardar argues, Said describes the Muslims as 'traditional – the very word has notions of inferiority – simple, emotional [and] conformists'.<sup>61</sup>

We can observe that the Saidian critical current bases its argument on an absolute binary opposition between 'West' and 'East', 'colonizer' and 'colonized', 'object' and 'subject', 'self' and 'other', 'us' and 'them'. Such an approach leaves no room for intercultural relations, or for what Homi Bhabha calls 'hybridity'. Unlike Said and his followers, who dichotomize the world into polar opposites, Bhabha adopts a kind of deconstructionist approach. His sense of the multi-positionality of cultural location seeks a theoretical space that avoids such binarism. In *The Location of Culture*, he speaks of post-colonial cultures as 'hybrid' ones, in which articulating heterogeneous and contradictory elements is possible. He argues for a cultural location which:

overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics.<sup>62</sup>

By the enunciation of the 'cultural differences' and by articulating this 'hybridity' or 'Third Space', as Homi Bhabha argues elsewhere, 'we may elude the politics of polarity

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<sup>61</sup> Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), p.74.

<sup>62</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.25.



and emerge as the others of ourselves'.<sup>63</sup> Binary opposition, therefore, is a misleading understanding of cultural encounters, for it brings about ignorance of specific individual ideas that are, discursively, heterogeneous.

The tendency of this group to homogenize the Western discourses about the East is, methodologically, problematic. Because, as many critics have noted, we can ask: what are the alternatives to this constant and 'monolithic' Orientalism suggested by Said and his followers? Does the concept of 'discourse' prevent this group of studies from offering any alternative to the Western writings on the East? In this respect, Ali Behdad asserts that even Foucault, whose notion of 'discourse' forms part of the basis for *Orientalism*, criticises the 'juridical conception of power that relies on the notion of prohibition' and, Behdad points out, cautions us against designating power relations exclusively in negative and repressive terms.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Dennis Porter tells us that it is possible to find at least three alternatives to the Orientalist discourse:

First, the very heterogeneity of the corpus of texts among which Said discovers hegemonic unity raises the question of the specificity of the literary instance within the superstructure. [...] Second, Said does not seem to envisage the possibility that more directly counter-hegemonic writings or an alternative canon may exist within the Western tradition. Third, the feasibility of a textual dialogue between Western and non-Western cultures needs to be considered, a dialogue that would cause subject/object relations to alternate, so that we might read ourselves as the others of our others and replace the notion of a place of truth with that of a knowledge which is always relative and provisional.<sup>65</sup>

Although Porter does not provide in his article any example of his alternatives, several studies, such those presented in this chapter, have found ample evidence of these

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<sup>63</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences', in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 206-209 (p.209).

<sup>64</sup> Ali Behdad, *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Ireland: Cork University Press, 1994), p.12.

<sup>65</sup> Dennis Porter, 'Orientalism and its Problems', in *Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 150-161 (p.153).

alternatives in Western travel writing on the Middle East.

To sum up, though I agree that Western discourses have false visions of the Orient, this is not the whole picture. The critical current represented by Said and his followers suffers from some traps that this thesis wishes to avoid: sweeping generalizations, selective examples, polemic and provocative arguments, and failing to provide alternatives.

## 2. Anti-Saidians

As a reaction, post-colonial studies have witnessed some attempts to take up the challenges of Said and his followers. Among these attempts, we can find Syrine Chafic Hout's *Viewing Europe From Outside* (1994). She embarks upon the theory of 'discourse', describing her approach as 'anti-Foucauldian' because, instead of confirming the epistemological distinction between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she puts together different texts from the both periods according to their analogous ideologies and attitudes.<sup>66</sup> Hout has chosen five texts for her study: Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*<sup>67</sup>, Oliver Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World*<sup>68</sup>, Chateaubriand's *Itinéraire de Paris à*

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<sup>66</sup> Syrine Chafic Hout, 'Viewing Europe From The Outside: Cultural Encounters and European Culture Critiques in the Eighteenth-Century Pseudo-Oriental Travelogue and the Nineteenth century 'Voyage en Orient'', (Doctoral dissertation, Colombia University, 1994 [published later in 1997 by Peter Lang]), p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) was a French writer and philosopher who lived during the Enlightenment. His *Lettres Persanes* (1721) brought him instant reputation. In these letters, allegedly written as correspondence between Persian travellers in Europe and their friends in Asia, he lampooned and criticised French and Parisian manners. The book appeared in English as *Persian Letters*, trans. by Mr. Ozell, 2 vols (London: J. Tonson, 1722).

<sup>68</sup> Oliver Goldsmith (1730- 1774) was an Irish writer, poet, and novelist. His work *The Citizen of the World* (1762) is an evident mimesis of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, in which Goldsmith satirised English manners and customs through the letters written by an imaginary Chinese philosopher, Lien Chi Altangi who lived in London, to his friends in the East.



*Jerusalem*<sup>69</sup>, Alexander Kinglake's *Eothen*, and Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*. The two main points that link these texts, she points out, are, first, the 'crossing of the cultural boundaries', regardless of the identity of the traveller and the place where he travelled, and, second, the tendency to criticise, indirectly, European culture 'by using the topos of the Orient as other'. She seeks to show how critiques of European culture took place in Western literary travelogues by analyzing the various narrative strategies for 'cultural self-criticism'.<sup>70</sup> Her approach, as she argues, draws upon Hayden White's 'tropological theory of discourse', which provides a way of assorting several kinds of discourse by relying on their linguistic systems rather than their contents, which are always interpreted differently.<sup>71</sup>

In part one, Hout argues that, in the *Lettres Persanes*, the encounters between Persian travellers and European characters, or Oriental and Occidental worlds, are articulated in the pattern of what she calls a 'cultural monologue'. This monological pattern serves as a strategy for criticising both Western and Eastern societies. She demonstrates this argument by explaining several features of this monologue in the text, including its epistolary forms, the features of 'Usbek' and 'Rica' as the two main Persian visitors and later writers, their manners in the Parisian community and communications with French characters, as well as their attitudes to political and cultural issues as mouthpieces of Montesquieu.<sup>72</sup> For instance, she maintains, the moral and social reasons that 'Usbek' offers for the problem of 'depopulation', become points of cultural criticism. These points

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<sup>69</sup> François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) was a French novelist and a precursor of Romanticism in French literature. His work *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811) came into English as *Travels in Greece, Palestine, Egypt, and Barbary, during the years 1806 and 1807*, trans. by Frederic Shoberl (London: Henry Colburn, 1811).

<sup>70</sup> Hout, 'Viewing Europe From The Outside', p. 1-2.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, pp.47-48.

include polygamy and the holding of harems in the Muslim world, monachism and the ban on divorce in Catholic countries, the slave trade, Islamic fatalism and the Western constitution of primogeniture, the indolence of primitive tribes, and, finally, the occupation of the New World by the Conquistadors.<sup>73</sup> Also she claims that Chateaubriand's *Intineraire de Paris a Jerusalem* is 'an example of muted or muffled satire' meaning it illustrates the several monological ways in which the traveller-narrator conceals his criticism of European cultural and political activities at home and abroad.<sup>74</sup> For example, she asserts, Chateaubriand criticised Napoleon on several occasions and in different contexts. In part I, he made an analogy between him and an oppressive ruler in Turkey, and in the last part of his narrative portrayed him as similar to Belisarius, one of the most famous Greek imperialists.<sup>75</sup> Chateaubriand also criticises the English colonial behaviour evidently in Greece, in the English search for Agamemnon's tomb and a half-destroyed temple. He also accuses the English of stealing eleven columns, previously described by antiquarians, from the temple. To anticipate any counter-accusation by English readers, he maintains that the French, as well, have stolen 'Italian statues and paintings'.<sup>76</sup>

In part two, Hout examines the works of Goldsmith and Nerval. Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World*, she argues, succeeds in depicting a new world in which characters from Eastern and Western culture found it possible, interesting, and useful to communicate with each other, and exchange beliefs about their different backgrounds. Moreover, she asserts that the dialogue in this work serves as a narrative strategy for criticising European

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p.89.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p.139.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, pp.184-185.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p.200.



culture.<sup>77</sup> Altangi, the main character of the narrative echoing Goldsmith, she maintains, condemns European travellers, accusing them of dividing human beings by emphasizing differences of appearance instead of stressing similarities among them. Moreover, he criticises England for being lacking in hospitality, in comparison with other countries, because foreigners 'find themselves ridiculed and insulted in every street; they meet with none of those trifling civilities, so frequent elsewhere, which are instances of mutual good will without previous acquaintance'.<sup>78</sup> The criticism of English hegemony, Hout adds, is one of the features of Goldsmith's work. For instance, Altangi declares that he is 'an enemy to nothing in this good world but war'. Thus, British and French colonial activities in North America (1754/1755-63) are directly and indirectly attacked.<sup>79</sup>

In Hout's view, Nerval, like Goldsmith, avoided censorship by hiding behind his character 'Gerard'. Like Altangi, Gerard condemns European culture directly and indirectly. Hout claims that Gerard is aware that most of the faulty European ideas about the East had their roots in the eighteenth century.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, she goes on, he is greatly impressed by Islam. For him, not only is the Orient the home of most religions, but also Muslim Turks and Arabs are more tolerant than Western Catholics.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, Gerard tries to combat some of the Western clichés about the Orient. With reference of the question of polygamy, Hout claims that the relationships between men and women in the East were generally seen as more innocent than those in Europe. Slaves owned by Muslims,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p.221.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.250. See also Oliver Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World, The Bee* (London: Everyman's Library, 1970), p. 252.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, pp.287-288. Goldsmith, in fact, openly criticised the colonial ambitions of England and France, asserting that 'wherever the French landed, they called the country their own; and the English took possession wherever they came upon the same equitable pretensions'. See Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World*, p. 44.

<sup>80</sup> Hout, 'Viewing Europe From The Outside', p335.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p.341.

as well, were seen as much better off than those owned by Christians in America because the American slaves were forced to do hard work, and their trade was allowed by religion. Gerard also admires, Hout asserts, the cultural achievements of the East, confirming the importance of what other travellers disregarded. He acknowledges 'European scholarship's indebtedness to Arab scholar's translations of ancient Greek philosophical texts'. Hout ultimately asserts that Gerard considers the East to be superior to Europe in two main aspects: 'upward social mobility and racial tolerance'. She maintains that Gerard, or Nerval, was impressed by the East to the extent that he believed that the 'sure way for Europeans to attain higher posts is conversion to Islam'.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, she concludes, Gerard did not give a '*carte blanche*' to European colonialism in the Middle East. He was against the terrorism practiced by colonialism, whether that was psychological or military, French or English.<sup>83</sup>

Kathryn Ann Sampson, in *The Romantic Literary Pilgrimage to the Orient* (1999), claims that her thesis 'challenges Edward Said's interpretation of Orientalist texts in emphasizing the impact of the East upon Western beliefs as more significant than previously indicated by contemporary colonialist criticism'.<sup>84</sup> Thus, she examines the British fascination with the Orient, investigating ways in which perceptions of the Orient shaped British self-representations and the representations of religious difference during imperial expansion. For this purpose, she selects three texts: Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*<sup>85</sup>, Walter Scott's *The Talisman*<sup>86</sup> and Richard Burton's *Personal Narrative of a*

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, pp.358-361.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, pp.364-366.

<sup>84</sup> Kathryn Ann Sampson, 'The Romantic Literary Pilgrimage to the Orient: Byron, Scott, and Burton' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1999), p.VII.

<sup>85</sup> George Gordon Byron (1788-1824) was a poet and one of the prominent figures of the Romantic Movement in England. He enjoyed immediate reputation with the publication of "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" (1812), a narrative poem about the voyage of a little man through southern Europe and the East.



*Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah & Meccah*. Proposing that the social image of these Romantic-Orientalist texts is very 'ambiguous, discontinuous and plural', her approach draws upon critics such as Aijaz Ahmed, James Clifford and Homi Bhabha, who have tried to shift Said's position onto changing terrains that consider 'ambivalence, heterogeneity and the irregularities of Orientalism'.<sup>87</sup> Terminologically, she argues that 'pilgrimages' in the West were no longer undertaken by Christian believers searching for the Holy Grail, but rather by those who sought the adoration of the 'ancients, human love, nature, self, and power'. Thus, she maintains, Byron, Scott, and Burton's literary pilgrimages to the Orient suited British society, which was looking for new identities as a result of the disruption created by secular concepts and scientific revolution.<sup>88</sup>

Sampson argues that *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* can be read as Byron's endeavour to engender his own personal Romantic allegory beyond the historic dogma of Christianity. It reflects an increasing religious distrust of the West' a questioning attitude that was the outcome of encountering the religious 'other'.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, she maintains, the Orient, for Byron, became a place where the British subject could find 'spiritual emancipation' through the repudiation of conventional religious identity. Moreover, she notes that unlike most Romantic writers who presented the Orient in stereotyped negative images as a way of praising Western religious superiority, Byron endeavoured to avoid such polarization in

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One of the critics of this work asserts that 'Byron's Oriental space offers liberatory possibilities of the critique of Western, European, English concepts, taboos, norms, and standards-political, social, sexual, poetical, economic, and cultural'. See Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 137.

<sup>86</sup> Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) was a Scottish novelist and poet. His novel *The Talisman* was initially published together with *The Betrothed* under the title *Tales of the Crusaders* in 1825. The text of *The Talisman* is a narrative of encounters between the West, led by King Richard the Lionhearted, and the East, led by Saladin, sultan of Egypt and Syria, during the Third Crusade.

<sup>87</sup> Sampson, 'The Romantic Literary Pilgrimage to the Orient', pp.1-9.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, pp.19-20.

*Childe Harold*. This separates his writing, Sampson argues, from traditional Western representations of the Orient.<sup>90</sup> She asserts that Byron's Orient reflects the Western elitist eagerness to consider the East as a perfect place where one could escape from the suppression of social and religious chastisements: 'The scene was savage, but the scene was new', says Byron.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, Sampson argues that although Islam never seemed to have offered Byron an alternative faith, his writings to family and friends implied his more than incidental regard of it. She claims that Isaac Disraeli believed that Byron 'often thought of turning Musselman while in Turkey, and regretted not having done so'.<sup>92</sup>

In discussing Scott's *The Talisman*, Sampson focuses on the notion of the travellers' masquerade. She claims that for Western travellers, disguise served as a manifest form of conversion to Oriental culture. Many Europeans, after concealing themselves as Easterners, accepted the cultural-religious beliefs of the countries they travelled through. Lady Hester Stanhope, Lady Ann Blunt, and Jean Burckhardt, she notes, were but a few of the Romantic travellers who disguised themselves as Muslims and who 'most probably converted to Islam'.<sup>93</sup> She argues that Scott's Orient serves as the 'mask' by which Eastern culture, cleverly, was introduced to the Western audience. Scott's Muslim hero Saladin cannot, therefore, be seen as a simplistic representation. The image of Saladin in *The Talisman*, she maintains, refutes the European belief that the 'heathen could not have real literature, philosophy, and piety'.<sup>94</sup> Scott, she goes on, rejected the medieval image of the Arabs as

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, pp.130-131.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, pp.140-142.

<sup>91</sup> Byron, *Child Harold's Pilgrimage And Other Romantic Poems* (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1936), p. 62.

<sup>92</sup> Sampson, 'The Romantic Literary Pilgrimage to the Orient', pp.152.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p.174.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, pp.176-178.



'fanatical savages' who had come out from the heart of Arabia, with the sword in one hand, and the Koran in the other, to 'inflict death or the faith of Mahommed, or at the best, slavery and tribute upon all who dared to oppose the belief of the prophet of Mecca'.<sup>95</sup> Scott's portrayal of the Muslim ruler, Sampson argues, also reflects much religious toleration. When Richard and Saladin meet in *The Talisman*, they hug 'as brethren and equals'. The picture of the infidel is abolished by representations of Saladin as a 'pious Muslim'.<sup>96</sup> In *The Talisman*, she asserts, Scott also replaces the image of the barbarous Saracen with that of the chivalrous desert Arab, and the paradigm of proud independence. Eastern government in the novel is depicted as 'a pure and simple monarchy' and mirrors the rebellious notions of nationalism.<sup>97</sup> Finally, she concludes that the great triumph in the novel and history is accomplished by Saladin who, through the use of masquerade, is able to 'infiltrate the crusade camp long enough' to veil the cultural and religious difference between East and West.<sup>98</sup>

For Burton, Sampson argues that although he is always classified as a 'colonialist adventurer', his Oriental journey was also religious in nature. His biography has some details about his joining with Nagar Brahmins in India and his 'eventual conversion to Islam through Sufism', a Muslim sect, which had created the performance of *taqiya*, or hiding of belief.<sup>99</sup> In his essay 'El Islam', Sampson claims, Burton mentions what led him to Islam and Sufism and the rejection of Christianity, which he thought that had been

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<sup>95</sup> Walter Scott, *The Talisman* (London: J. M. Dent, 1956), pp. 20-21.

<sup>96</sup> Sampson, 'The Romantic Literary Pilgrimage to the Orient', pp. 179-180.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p.183.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p.205. Similarly, W. M. Parker, in his preface of the edition of 1956, asserts that '*The Talisman* is probably the first, or among the first, of English novels to praise Mohammedans'. p. ix.

<sup>99</sup> Sampson, 'The Romantic Literary Pilgrimage to the Orient', p. 208.

smearred by 'malice and hate, persecution and bloodshed'. In contrast, Burton praised Islam for its 'well-ordered religious life which involved dietary prescriptions, ceremonial cleansing, prayers at stated times, as well as for its mystical beliefs'.<sup>100</sup>

The main themes of this group of writers run completely against the claims and arguments of the first group. While the Saidians, as we have seen, argue that Europeans' travel writing shows 'Western domination over the Orient' (Said) or 'exiling the Orient into an irretrievable state of otherness' (Kabbani) or a 'European feeling of racial superiority' (AL-Taha), the second group finds such qualities as: 'crossing cultural boundaries', 'cultural self-criticism' (Hout), and 'Romantic Orientalism' or 'fascination with the Orient' (Sampson).

To illustrate the idea of 'crossing cultural boundaries', let us consider examples given by the second strand and how they differ from those given by the first. While Said, for instance, concludes that Nerval had a 'negative vision of an emptied Orient'<sup>101</sup>, Hout tells us that Nerval was impressed by the East to the extent that he suggested that Europeans should convert to Islam 'to attain higher posts', as we have seen. Burton is another good example for such comparison. While Said, Kabbani and AL-Taha are in agreement about the 'imperial mission' of Burton, Sampson provides a different perspective. She argues for the religious dimension of his writing, asserting that Burton rejected Christianity and found an alternative in the Islamic sect of *Sufism*. I do not, by this comparison, mean to imply that the second group's interpretation is more accurate than that of the first one. Rather, I wish to point out the possibility of perceiving colonial discourse in different ways. I think such a possibility might offer a way for crossing cultural boundaries. In this regard, Mary Louise Pratt draws our attention to what she labels a

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>101</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p.184.



'contact zone', a location, she asserts, where relations between colonizers and colonized or travellers and natives should be understood, not in terms of racial discrimination, but in terms of cultural diversity.<sup>102</sup>

Another important point with regard to crossing cultural boundaries deserves more attention. That is the phenomenon of travellers' disguise or what Dianne Sachko Macleod calls 'cross-dressing'.<sup>103</sup> In this regard, let us compare contradictory positions from the first and the second strands. Rana Kabbani, for instance, looks at disguise as a 'game' that was played by Western travellers such as Lane, Burton and Lawrence for both pleasure and duty. One of the funny aspects of disguise, she argues, is that it offered both the wearer and his audience amusement. It fuelled Western imagination about an East of adventure and secrecy. Kabbani believes that, in reality, no European wished to become Oriental by adapting Eastern dress, manner and speech. Thus, she asserts, West and East 'continued as two distinct and unmeeting entities, between which only the most superficial ties could be had'.<sup>104</sup> The disguise, she adds, came to serve political aims. It was a 'means of infiltrating into a society in order to gain information'.<sup>105</sup> As we have seen previously, Burton was given as an example for this mission. In contrast to Kabbani's position, consider the different perspective of disguise offered by Sampson. She sees Scott's masquerade as a tool that he used to introduce Eastern philosophies to a Western audience.

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<sup>102</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp.6-7.

<sup>103</sup> Dianne Sachko Macleod, 'Cross-Cultural Cross-Dressing: Class, Gender and Modernist Sexual Identity', in *Orientalism Transposed: The Impact of the Colonies on British Culture*, ed. by Julie F. Codell and Dianne Sachko Macleod (England: Ashgate, 1998), pp.63-80. Macleod, in this article, speaks of the adoption of the Oriental dress by Western travellers. More significantly, she argues that when some Western aristocrats such as Lady Mary Montague, Lady Archibald Cambell and Lady Ottoline Morrell appeared in long Turkish pants in their societies, their behaviour was more than a matter of fashion. Instead, "cross-cultural cross-dressing allowed them to stretch the boundaries of their gender and to distance themselves from the constricting norms of Victorian and Edwardian sexual stereotypes", p.64.

<sup>104</sup> Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, p.89-90.

What is worth considering, in this debate is the ideology of 'cultural self-critique' which represents a significant aspect among the second group of Oriental scholars. Syrine Chafic Hout's discussion of the cultural self-criticism in the Western travel writing, as we have seen, problematizes the first group's project of Orientalism as a Western monolithic view of the 'other'. Instead of reading Western travel narratives as a European critique of the Orient, she looks at the other side of the formula; that is, she reads the narratives as European 'cultural self-criticism'.

The idea of seeing oneself from outside, to which Hout devotes her thesis, coincides with what Dennis Porter calls 'critical travel', meaning the works of some Western travellers that 'pose or cause to be posed questions of central significance for European societies'.<sup>106</sup> Within such a perspective, also, one could read the travel account from another angle, that is, one could perceive the Orientalist text that Said and his followers charge with hostility towards the East, as a mirror of self, a mirror in which the Oriental Other may see his culture's vices and flaws. This is what Mohammed Javadi, as we shall see later, declares that he learnt from the travel writing on Iran that detailed some faults of Persian manners and customs. With this openness, I think, we can read colonial texts from several points of view and, therefore, avoid falling into the trap of making sweeping generalizations or taking arguments to extremes.

Moreover, this trend of studies concerns the aspect of 'Romantic Orientalism' in which, as we have seen, Kathryn Sampson draws our attention to the British fascination with the Orient during the age of imperialist expansion. Mohammed Sharafuddin, in his *Islam And Romantic Orientalism*, provides a good example of this aesthetic dimension in

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p.91.

<sup>106</sup> Dennis Porter, *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p.16.



Western writings on the Orient, taking up the challenge of Said's *Orientalism*. He mentions that if we judge all Western writers as products of their imperialist culture, as Said does, this charge is not only flawed but also misleading, because it demolishes some features of writers who could be described as revolutionaries. Thus, Sharafuddin's thesis aims to 'rethink the context and purpose of a given text and what it aims to achieve in its audience before we condemn its author as a partaker of his age's ignorance and blindness'.<sup>107</sup> The examples that he has chosen for his study are Landor's *Gebir*, Sauthey's *Thalaba*, Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* and Byron's 'Turkish Tales'. These are chosen because they 'mark an advance in the understanding of and sympathy with the Orient'.<sup>108</sup>

Notwithstanding the efforts made by the second group of Oriental scholars to destabilize the consistent negativity of Said and his followers, I think both groups tend towards one-sided analysis. The difference exists only in that the first group takes its argument to a negative extreme, while the second group takes it to the positive one. Although here I have no intention to criticise or make light of either of the two approaches, I would advocate a middle way.

### 3. Middle-of-the-road

The third category of studies about Western travel writings on the Orient is what I will call the 'middle-of-the-road', meaning those studies, which take a middle way between Said with his followers on one hand, and his opponents on the other. These studies draw upon the idea of 'heterogeneity' in literary texts.

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<sup>107</sup> Mohammed Sharafuddin, *Islam and Romantic Orientalism: Literary Encounters with the Orient* (London and New York: I.B.Tauris Publishers, 1994), pp. viii-ix.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. xviii.

Mohamed Javadi's *Iran Under Western Eyes* (1984) represents this type of tropism in dealing with Western travel writing. He believes that travellers to Iran were 'as heterogeneous as their accounts [were] diversified'. That is, they covered a wide spectrum, varying from accounts of subjective points of view to highly objective observations.<sup>109</sup> According to him, there were two groups of Western visitors to Iran; those whose books were generally imbued with deep sense of cultural and racial superiority, and those who looked for a hideaway, in travel, from arbitrary forces at home, and from the 'ugly industrial settings of Victorian England'.<sup>110</sup> He argues that when a traveller visited a foreign country 'with Adam's eyes', he or she could observe the virtues and faults of that country unnoticed by its natives. Taking up this notion led Javadi to accept the ideology of 'self-critique'. Having spent some years abroad, he claims that he can see Iran from an impartial position. He puts it, 'I personally was awakened to some basic flaws in Persian manners and way of life by reading travel books on Iran'.<sup>111</sup>

In his second chapter 'Biased opinions against Persia', Javadi argues that religious polemicists have often revealed dread of non-Christian people, particularly of Muslims, but James Morier's dread and hatred of Islam in *Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, seemed to be morbid and uncontrollable.<sup>112</sup> He saw Islam, Javadi claims, as a potential menace to what he

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<sup>109</sup> Mohamed Javadi, 'Iran Under Western Eyes: a Literary Appreciation of Travel Books on Iran from 1900 to 1940' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1984), p.8.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, pp.6-7.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>112</sup> James Justinian Morier (1780-1849) was an English diplomat, traveller and novelist. From 1810 to 1815 he was the British secretary at the court of Persia. His experience in the East led him to write three travel books: *A Journey Through Persia, Armenia and Asia Minor to Constantinople in the Years 1808 and 1809* (1812), *A Second Journey Through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, to Constantinople, between the Years 1810 and 1816* (1818), and *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824). *Hajji Baba* was more admired by critics than the two journeys. Sir Walter Stewart in his introduction to the edition of 1925 asserts that *Hajji Baba* is 'proper to regard as a novel and as a book of travel', because it was 'intended by the author to present facts in a dramatic form'. See James Morier, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. vii.



described as 'civilization', and throughout his writings about Persia he made the best of opportunities to show the 'heathenishness' of Muslims in Persia.<sup>113</sup> Also, he asserts, *Hajji Baba* did a great disservice to Persia by creating a 'caricatured life of a picaro' while suggesting that his behavior was representative of an average Persian. And, he suggests, subsequent travellers who believed in what they defined as the 'innate inferiority of the Asiatics' and who were mostly agents of the British government, selected for their jobs because of their contemptuous attitudes to non-Europeans, took *Hajji Baba* as 'gospel truth'.<sup>114</sup> Beside Morier, stands Donald Stewart, with his a 'consistently low opinion of Persia', maintains Javadi. Stewart's racism is evident in his lack of care for the suffering of the 'downtrodden masses' in Persia. Perhaps Stewart, Javadi explains, was not aware of the fact that the masses 'he hated and abused' were products of the tyrannical forms that were often supported by the colonialists who employed people like Morier and himself to hold their hegemony over the colonized countries.<sup>115</sup> Another aspect of British travellers' racism, he asserts, is their denunciation of despotism in the West, but acceptance of it in the East. Stewart overtly says that 'the Orientals cannot understand democracy', and they can only ruled by a tyrant, because in his opinion, democracy is a 'delicate flower that can grow only in the West'.<sup>116</sup>

In chapter three, 'The Romantics', Javadi argues that the late nineteenth century witnessed a new reason for travel to the Orient; it was 'travel as an escape'. Some young British 'iconoclasts' set out for the East looking for new meanings in the Oriental beliefs

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p.48.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p.59.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p.70. Javadi might mean Donald Stuart the author of *The Struggle for Persia* (London: Methuen, 1902). Stuart visited Iran during his trip from Russia to England in 1901.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p.73. See also Stuart, *The Struggle for Persia*, pp. 129-130.

and ideas. In Persia, he maintains, they attempted to live Omar Khayam's slogan, 'seize the moment'. But these romantics, he adds, were, in general, disappointed. Instead of finding the people living in 'Edenic innocence' and naturalness, 'walking in rose gardens and talking to each other in poetry', they saw backwardness and poverty.<sup>117</sup> Among these travellers, Javadi explains, Gertrude Bell held the most romantic picture of Persia.<sup>118</sup> One of her manifest romantic attitudes, he continues, is her praise of the Persians' power to extract happiness from simple things in life. She believed that the main reason for tedium in the West was the decline of the average Westerner's ability to imagine and to appreciate natural beauties, and she was glad that this was absent in the Orient.<sup>119</sup> He asserts that Bell, influenced by this love of simplicity, could transcend the boundaries of race, culture, and nationality to see herself as part of a global human brotherhood: 'Ah, simple pleasure, so familiar in a land so far removed! Not in great towns, not in places, had we felt the tie of humanity which binds East and West'.<sup>120</sup> However, he notes that Bell could convincingly portray not only the romantic dimension of Persia, but also 'its grisly and macabre side'. Showing her compassion for the poor, she was grieved to see the undernourished and raw-

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<sup>117</sup> Javadi, 'Iran Under Western Eyes', pp.104-105.

<sup>118</sup> Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell (1868-1926) was a British archaeologist, travel writer and diplomat. After graduating from Oxford in 1888 she made her first tour abroad and visited Persia. She learnt Persian and published *Safar Nameh: Persian Pictures: A Book of Travel* (London: R. Bentley, 1894) and a translation, *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz* (London: Heinemann, 1897). In 1899 she travelled to Jerusalem, to learn Arabic and advance her interest in history and archaeology. She came back to the Middle East in 1905 travelling widely in Syria, Asia Minor and Turkey, making archaeological excavations and writing her travelogues. Her works from this time include *The Desert and the Sown* (London: Heinemann 1907), *The Thousand and One Churches* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), *Amurath to Amurath* (London: Heinemann, 1911) and *The Palace and Mosque of Ukhaidir* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914). In 1916, she was posted Assistant Political Officer in Basra, and after the war was appointed Oriental Secretary in Baghdad. This experience led her to write *The Arab of Mesopotamia* (Basrah: The Superintendent, Government Press, 1916). For further details, see Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen: The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1997).

<sup>119</sup> Javadi, 'Iran Under Western Eyes', p.119.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p.120. See also Bell, *Persian Pictures* (London: Ernest Benn, 1928), p. 119. It seems that the idea of unifying 'East' and 'West' is an obvious theme in Bell's work. One of the different expressions that assert this idea in her work is 'A curious savour of mingled East and West hung about the little palace', p. 141.



boned mourners hit themselves while they were 'streaming with sweat and tears', and surrounded by an audience who was generally poor, their faces 'stricken and furrowed with cruel poverty and hunger'. Javadi justifies Bell's anger as being directed at those who exploited religion as a means of keeping the masses in ignorance and poverty. He argues that Bell is not a bigoted 'denigrator of religions' and her critiques are always 'made good naturedly', with none of the biased and heated condemnation of Morier or Stewart.<sup>121</sup>

In chapter four, 'Anti-Romantics', Javadi claims that Western travellers to Persia after World War I were anti-romantic, for they were 'socialist and inspired by the Russian Revolution', and attempted to show the unromantic side of the Orient. For instance, he argues, Oriental attractions such as bazaars, gardens, camels, caravans, handicrafts, rural simplicity, countryside beauty, and so on, which were praised by the Romantics, did not appeal to these travellers. However, he asserts, they drew, beyond their limited interests, 'unbiased pictures of Persia'.<sup>122</sup> He cites Freya Stark as the best representative of this group of travellers.<sup>123</sup> Like almost all travellers to Persia in this period, Stark spoke amply of the nomads of Persia in her account, *The Valleys of the Assassins*. He argues that she admired the nomads' refusal of the chains of a routine life, their bravery, their unbounded generosity, and their healthy and natural life.<sup>124</sup> In contrast, she criticised Western man's obsession with his means of livelihood, which meant that 'no thought and time is left for

<sup>121</sup> Javadi, 'Iran Under Western Eyes', pp.131-133.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, pp.183-184.

<sup>123</sup> Dame Freya Stark (1893-1993) is a famous 20<sup>th</sup> century British traveller in the Middle East. She undertook her travels in the 1930s while on British government service in the Middle East. She travelled extensively through the Arab world, Persia, Turkey, and Afghanistan by camel, horse and mule. Stark left behind a number of travelogues, including: *Baghdad Sketches* (London: John Murray, 1932), *The Valleys of the Assassins, and other Persian Travels* (London: John Murray, 1934), *The Southern Gates of Arabia: A Journey to the Hadhramaut* (London: John Murray, 1936), *Winter in Arabia* (London: John Murray, 1940), *East is West* (London: John Murray, 1945), and *Traveller's Prelude: Autobiography 1893-1927* (London: John Murray, 1950). See Molly Izzard, *Freya Stark: A Biography* (London: Sceptre, 1993).

<sup>124</sup> Javadi, 'Iran Under Western Eyes', p.218.

the enjoyment of life itself'.<sup>125</sup>

In the final chapter, 'Travellers as humanist esthete', he argues that in the years between the two World Wars, many 'young and gifted' travellers produced travel literature and imbued it with a 'new tolerance and understanding of the Easterner's way of life'. These 'young iconoclasts', Javadi maintains, attempted to avoid inherited ideas about racial superiority, and set out to the Orient to gain first-hand knowledge of the area.<sup>126</sup> A good example of this group, he argues, is Robert Byron<sup>127</sup> who during his journey to India was constantly struck by 'two appalling facts': the natives' apathy toward their fate, and more significantly, the 'snobbery and disdainful attitudes' of the English officers toward the Indian people. Also, he asserts, Byron was 'scandalized' to see British officials, full of Anglo-Saxon superiority, disdainful of others' manners and customs.<sup>128</sup> According to Javadi, Byron was fair in his criticism. He condemns 'vice and folly wherever he sees it, whether it be Europeans or Easterners'. In Iran, he maintains, Byron was wrathful to see some castles and forts, which were perfect works of art, demolished by the order of the British military commander.<sup>129</sup>

In the same way, Eduardus Van de Bilt's *Proximity and Distance* (1985) argues that if we wish to 'avoid Said's mistake', we should not fix travellers' dealings with the Orient

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p.221.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p.249.

<sup>127</sup> Robert Byron (1905-1941) was a British travel writer, aesthete, and historian. His 'masterpiece,' *The Road to Oxiana* (London: Macmillan, 1937) is about his excursion in 1933-4 through Cyprus, Palestine, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. Byron was impressed by Islamic art and architecture, and the major aim of his journey was to study and appreciate it.

<sup>128</sup> Javadi, 'Iran Under Western Eyes', p.258.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, p.299.



in one or two sweeping generalizations.<sup>130</sup> In his examination of American travellers' responses to the Middle East, Van de Bilt takes a very different approach from that of Said. He believes that, in studying travel writing, one has not only to distinguish between variant periods of time or sets of travellers, but also to be aware of the existence of different voices within one and the same travel narrative. He argues that, in order to treat fairly the complication of the travel experience and its critical and uncritical themes, one has to consider variations among the travellers in religion, social class, and gender, and to 'have an eye for the ambivalence and ambiguity of their responses to the Orient'.<sup>131</sup> In his Introduction, Van de Bilt states the aims of his study, which are to explore the different ways in which roughly one hundred American travellers have dealt with the Middle East in their writing, and the result of their inharmonious attitudes. He explains that 'if for instance, as I intend to argue, the Americans react equivocally, to the region and its inhabitants, how is one to judge them? Can one criticize them and do they criticize themselves? And if so, how?'<sup>132</sup> Yet, there are two different types of response that Van de Bilt identifies from American travel accounts on the Middle East between 1819 and 1918.

The first type of response was, he claims, to produce a series of biased depictions of Oriental populations. In several narratives, he argues, the local people of the East are referred to as 'these animals in human shape'. In general, visitors deliberately focused on the vices of the Oriental character, such as its fatalism, its idiocy, or its 'lack of energy and enterprise'. William Loring in his *A Confederate Soldier in Egypt*<sup>133</sup>, he explains, believes

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<sup>130</sup> Eduardus Franciscus Van de Bilt, 'Proximity and Distance: American Travellers to the Middle East, 1819-1918' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1985), p.16.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, p.18.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>133</sup> William Wing Loring (1818-1886) was an American officer who, in 1859, made an extensive voyage to Europe and Egypt to study military strategies. In 1869 he set off for Egypt again to serve as an officer in the

that Easterners are unable 'to think long or deeply. They dream and smoke, and leave everything to Allah'.<sup>134</sup> Also, Van de Bilt goes on, many travellers agreed with Stephen Olin's *Travels in Egypt*,<sup>135</sup> that the 'Mohammedans lie[d] without any compunction', and even if Easterners wanted to say the fact, they could not to do so, because their language was too hyperbolic or as Bayard Taylor said 'The Arabic [...] Abounds with the boldest metaphors'.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, Van de Bilt maintains that Islam was always viewed in travel narratives as the only cause of the Orient's decay. American travellers, he claims, charged Islam with being the cause of every single problem in Middle-Eastern countries, from the 'lack of intellectual stamina', to the degeneration of women in the East. Mohammed, Van de Bilt asserts, was portrayed as an 'imposter', and religious practices like daily prayers were depicted as 'ostentatious hypocrisy befitting Pharisees'.<sup>137</sup> Also, slaves in the East were seen as being worse off than ever they were in America. In comparison with the free farmers or 'fellahs' of Egypt, he maintains, Loring is convinced that 'slaves of America lived in palaces and dressed in linen'.<sup>138</sup>

The second type of American travellers' response was to offer impartial views about

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Egyptian army of Khedive Ismail. His experience is told in his first work, *A Confederate Soldier in Egypt* (1884).

<sup>134</sup> Van de Bilt, 'Proximity and Distance', pp. 82-83. Loring saw in Egypt 'more than a hundred thousand people who banqueted day and night at the government's expense'. However, he should have realised that this had nothing to do with their fatalism because the government of Said Pasha, as he said, was 'capricious and oppressive', and there were no opportunities to work. See Loring, *A Confederate Soldier in Egypt* (New York: Dodd, 1884), p. 48.

<sup>135</sup> Stephen Olin (1797-1851) was an American professor and president of Wesleyan University. In 1837 he embarked on a lengthy journey to the East, visiting Athens, Syria, Alexandria, Cairo, Thebes, Memphis, and other cities of Egypt. From Cairo he continued to Petra, by the way of Suez, Sinai, Akabah, and thence to the Holy Land. Then he went to Beirut and Constantinople, in his way back to America. This voyage is told in his book, *Travels in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land* (New York, 1843).

<sup>136</sup> Van de Bilt, 'Proximity and Distance', p. 85. Bayard Taylor (1825-1878) was an American poet and travel writer. After his journey in the Middle East, India, China, and Japan in 1851-1853, he published *The Lands of the Saracen; or, Pictures of Palestine, Asia Minor, Sicily, and Spain* (1855).

<sup>137</sup> Van de Bilt, 'Proximity and Distance', pp. 174-175.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p.180.



the Orient. For instance, Van de Bilt asserts, not all travellers protested that the situation of Oriental women was degenerate. James DeKay and Samuel Cox, he suggests, were 'struck with the profound respect which the Turks universally [paid] to the female sex' and were persuaded that 'the Turkish woman [was] more free than almost any other woman'.<sup>139</sup> Also in contrast to other travellers' condemnation of slavery in the East, Van de Bilt argues that some American travellers believed that Eastern slaves were well off. Cox, he claims, is convinced that the 'slave of the Turk is not the slave of the planter: there is no hereditary slavery in the East'. In addition, Cox said that 'the religion [...] soften[ed] the harshness of the institution, and [made] it a shadow' of its American parallel. Moreover, Van de Bilt continues, many American travellers mentioned that it was not rare for slaves in the Middle East to occupy high positions in the government.<sup>140</sup> He also notes that American travellers made several critical statements against their culture and country. Thomas Upham, he explains, was persuaded that 'in order to know them [the population of the East], we must love them'; this comment, Van de Bilt observes, took issue with his fellow travellers' biases about and desire to isolate themselves from the Oriental people.<sup>141</sup> Also, Van de Bilt maintains, many American travellers encountered charming qualities of the East that led them to make critical comments about their own country. By praising the Easterners' piety or admiring their denial of alcohol, American visitors showed that the Middle East aroused

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p.171. James DeKay, was an American businessman who visited Turkey in 1831 and 1832 and wrote *Sketches of Turkey* (New York, 1833). Samuel Cox was American ambassador in Constantinople and wrote *Diversions of a Diplomat in Turkey* (New York, 1887).

<sup>140</sup> Van de Bilt, 'Proximity and Distance', p. 181.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, pp.194-195. Thomas Cogswell Upham (1799-1872) was an American philosopher, educator, and author of a number of books in philosophy and religion. His experience in the East is written in his book *Letters Aesthetic, Social, and Moral, Written from Europe, Egypt, and Palestine* (Philadelphia: H. Longstreth, 1857). His sympathy with the Arabs is articulated in this passage:

'But neither the Arab of the city nor of the desert, so far as I can perceive, can be rightly charged with the injustice, cruelty, and faithlessness, which have been so freely alleged against him; and certainly not to the extent in which the charge has been made. It is not always safe to judge of men from the representations of

in them, as Bowman Dodd says, a 'dual sensation'. Van de Bilt adds that American travellers, unable to hide their captivation with the East's exoticism, by implication denounced their own country and culture for lacking romantic life.<sup>142</sup> George William Curtis is another example that Van de Bilt provides in this context.<sup>143</sup> He argues that Curtis's descriptions of the East are imbued with critical remarks about Western culture. He quotes this passage:

If you are a man, it will be necessary to recognize the imperial genius of the Prophet of the Saracens, and to be glad that to them was given a teacher after their kind. It will also be necessary to reflect, that the Eastern is a better Muslim, than the Western is Christian.<sup>144</sup>

Van de Bilt observes that although Curtis morally rejects polygamy, he is impressed by it as an aspect of the 'Orient's picturesque nature', and he denounces 'Western hypocrisy' concerning women.<sup>145</sup> Van de Bilt concludes that the 'benevolent idealism' that moves Curtis to value the East and its people positively is supported by authors like Upham and finds a place in several travel narratives that are imbued with a 'benevolent humanism that softens at least to some degree harsh American comments about the East's inhabitants'.<sup>146</sup>

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others. In order to judge them accurately, we must know them. But knowledge is the result of intercourse and confidence. In order to know them, therefore, we must love them'. (p. 346).

<sup>142</sup> Van de Bilt, 'Proximity and Distance', pp.196-197.

<sup>143</sup> George William Curtis (1824-1892) was an American social reformer, author and journalist. From 1846 to 1850, he embarked on a Grand Tour to Europe and the Middle East. After this journey he wrote two travelogues: *Nile notes of a Howadji* (New York, Harper, 1852), and *The Howadji in Syria* (New York: Harper, 1952).

<sup>144</sup> Curtis, *The Howadji in Syria*, p. 336. Although it is true, as Van de Bilt argues, that Curtis was impressed by some manners and beliefs of the Arabs, he, on the other hand, denigrated Eastern peoples, considering them as less than savages. He rejects the idea of 'savage faculty' in Egypt:

But "faculty" is a Western gift. Savages with faculty may become a leading race. But a leading race never degenerates, so long as faculty remains. The Egyptians and Easterns are not savages, they are imbeciles. It is the English fashion to laud the Orient, and to prophesy a renewed grandeur, as if the East could ever again be as bright as at sunrise. See Curtis, *Nile notes of a Howadji*, p. 49.

<sup>145</sup> Van de Bilt, 'Proximity and Distance', p.200.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, p.202.



John Spencer Dixon, in his thesis *Representations of the East* (1991), takes issue with the focus, in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, on an 'absolute division between East and West' as Dixon says. Dixon is interested in investigating whether western travel writers were 'universally imperialist and racist', as Said argues, in their attitudes towards Easterners and, particularly, towards Egyptians in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or whether there is 'evidence of other discourse'.<sup>147</sup> Methodologically, he disagrees with Said and attacks his thesis as being 'highly selective' in the travel writing he chooses to maintain his argument, focusing on those travellers with manifest imperialist attitudes. Dixon claims that, in contrast, the selection he provides in his thesis demonstrates travel writing in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to be 'much broader in scope, representing Egypt in a variety of ways', only some of which show tendencies of bias.<sup>148</sup> This means that there are some travel writings that attempt to run against general Western prejudices.

One of the good examples that Dixon selects, in contrast to Said, is what he calls 'The Curious Case of Lady Hester Stanhope'. Under this title, he argues that Stanhope's *Memoirs* (1845) and *Travels* (1846) are unique in their way of upsetting the kind of conflict between East and West. She was, Dixon maintains, exceptional among Western travellers in that she 'openly adopted Eastern habits as a deliberate rejection of Western ones'.<sup>149</sup> Also, he asserts that her writings are unique in their freedom from typical Western biases in terms of religion and customs of 'Orientals'. On religion she says:

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<sup>147</sup> John Spencer Dixon, 'Representations of the East in English and French Travel Writing 1798-1882 with particular reference to Egypt' (unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of Warwick, 1991), p.2.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, pp.113-114. Lady Hester Lucy Stanhope (1776 - 1839) was an English traveller who left England in 1810 and undertook many voyages in Egypt, Palestine then Syria. She later settled in Lebanon in the village of Joun where she spent the rest of her life. Her personal physician, C. L. Meryon, narrated her life in *Memoirs of the Lady Hester Stanhope*, 3 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1845) and in *Travels of Lady Hester Stanhope*, 3 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1846).

I am a philosopher and a missionary, and, between millions of Mohammedans and millions of Christians, who dispute which is the right way to Heaven I never pretend to set my self up as a judge of which is the best.<sup>150</sup>

The significance of Lady Hester Stanhope, Dixon asserts, is that she undermines the credibility of Said's argument concerning British and French travellers. Said divided travellers into two categories: the Romantic pilgrims such as Chateaubriand and Lamartine, and the travelling scholars such as Lane and Burton, but Lady Hester Stanhope does not fall into either category.<sup>151</sup> Further examples that Dixon offers to support his argument are Florence Nightingale and Lucy Duff Gordon.<sup>152</sup> The former, he claims, was spiritually inclined to Islam and felt that it provided a 'relief from the oppressive materiality of Christianity',<sup>153</sup> and the second managed to cut herself off from English culture so as to live more authentically among the Egyptians, and be more ready to listen, openly, to their 'reflections on European manners than she was keen to express her views of them'.<sup>154</sup>

However, Dixon asserts that this is not the whole vision of the French and English travellers to the East. In common with Said, he argues that the East is generally described in travel writing as a natural place for 'magic tricks', and that this led the Western travellers to

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<sup>150</sup> Dixon, 'Representations of the East', p.115. See also Charles Lewis Meryon, *Travels of Lady Hester Stanhope*, 3 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1846), II, p. 337.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, p.117.

<sup>152</sup> Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) was a British nurse, reformer, and traveller. She visited Egypt in 1849. Her journey is described in her book, *Letters from Egypt: A Journey on the Nile, 1849-1850* (London: Spottiswoode, 1854).

Lucie Duff Gordon (1821-1869) was a British Egyptologist who set off for Egypt and spent seven years, 1862-1869, mainly in Luxor, with visits to Cairo and Alexandria. Her work, *Letters from Egypt*, was first published by Macmillan in 1865, and enjoyed a number of editions in the same year. Her sympathy for the Arabs is manifest in this work.

<sup>153</sup> Dixon, 'Representations of the East', p.155.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, p.164.



the notion that the 'proper' place for rationalism is the West, and the 'proper' place for magic is the East. Edward Lane's wordy section about superstitions in Egypt, Dixon argues, is evidence of this common Western belief, because it shows that 'the 'natural' superiority of European science is marked by dismissing Egyptian ignorance of it'.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, Dixon goes on, travel writers and historians such as Lane and Russell were not able to avoid falling into typical European patterns. As a consequence, their texts reveal a 'barrier between Self and Other, between European and Egyptian/Oriental/Easterner'.<sup>156</sup> Dixon concludes that the level to which particular discourses of western travel writing are imbued with the imperialist and racist attitudes that Said describes is noticeably various. Dixon, however, points out that while Said's accusation against Kinglake and Burton of racism and imperialism is reasonable, he ignores 'more sympathetic' British travellers such as Florence Nightingale and Lucy Duff Gordon.<sup>157</sup>

Obviously enough, this critical trend, as we have seen from the examples mentioned above, takes its argument to a middle way between the first trend and the second. The dominant theme that pervades all the studies of this group is an appeal to diversity and heterogeneity. Thus, the tendency of Said and his followers to homogenize what is heterogeneous is rejected for two main reasons.

The first reason is that many examples of Western travellers' sympathy with the Orient challenge the first group's elimination of the role of the individual Orientalist. As Van de Bilt has noticed, in studying travel writing, one has not only to distinguish between variant periods of time or sets of travellers, but also to be aware of the existence of different

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, p.168. Lane devotes chapter ten of his book to the 'superstitions' of the Egyptians. See Lane, *an Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, pp. 223-265.

<sup>156</sup> Dixon, 'Representations of the East', p.169.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, p. 220.

voices within one and the same travel narrative. Having seen all the different experiences of the Western travellers in the Middle East, we are led to question the assumptions of the first line of argument. Many postcolonial scholars have suggested that the colonial text does not go only in one direction. Homi Bhabha, for instance, in his argument for 'the ambivalence of the colonial discourse' speaks of the coloniser's desire to imitate or to 'mimic' the colonised 'other'. Bhabha points to the possible compromise between 'self' and 'other': 'colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed recognizable other'.<sup>158</sup> Also, Dinnes Porter, in his comments of Said's recent calls for 'other ways of telling', asserts that these 'ways' were already available in the heterogeneity of many colonial texts.<sup>159</sup> And to demonstrate this idea, Porter provides some examples from the writing of T. E. Lawrence, whom Said has criticised as being as 'Imperial agent'.<sup>160</sup> Moreover, a good argument for the colonial text's heterogeneity is made by Lisa Lowe in her book, *Critical Terrains*. In chapter one 'Discourse and heterogeneity: situating Orientalism', she rejects the homogenizing view of the Orientalist discourse and offers another perspective. She says:

This book describes heterogeneous discursive terrains, not to contribute to a liberal pluralistic model of multiculturalism, but rather to emphasize that the relationships between Europe and colonized cultures are crossed by other interpellations and stratifications not reducible to the commonly held binary antagonism, and, most important, to underscore these overlapping and multiple inscriptions as moments of particular vulnerability in dominant discursive formations.<sup>161</sup>

This 'vulnerability' of the domination of Orientalism has been shown by many examples throughout this chapter, especially where I have discussed the ideas of 'crossing

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<sup>158</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.86.

<sup>159</sup> Porter, *Haunted Journeys*, p.5.

<sup>160</sup> See in *Orientalism*, for example, pages 196, 224, 225, 238.

<sup>161</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p.29.



cultural boundaries', 'cultural self-critiques' and 'Romantic Orientalism'. Thus, the monolithic project of Said and his advocates is undermined by such attempts of postcolonial studies. It is exactly as Sara Mills has put it in the epigraph quoted on the first page of this chapter, in which she asserts that colonial and postcolonial studies 'have troubled' Said's totalising perspective on colonial texts.

The second reason is that totalizing Orientalism as a hostile discourse is disturbed by female travel writing. Many critics have noticed that the project of Said's Orientalism ignores women's writings or is 'solely male-generated', as John M. Mackenzie says.<sup>162</sup> We have seen, previously, the examples provided by John Spencer Dixon's female travellers such as Lady Hester Stanhope, Florence Nightingale and Lucy Duff Gordon. These British women in their sympathy and fascination with the East, form a remarkable phenomenon that upsets the monolithic tradition of Western discourses described by Said and his followers. Attention to female writing on the Orient is therefore necessary because, as Reina Lewis says, it

disallows a conceptualization of discourse as intentionalist and unified by highlighting the structural role of sexual as well as racial difference in the formation of colonial subject positions; it destabilizes the fiction of authorial intent and control by highlighting the discursively produced and resolvable contradictions in women's accounts.<sup>163</sup>

Women's narratives, it is agreed, destabilize the notion of 'authorial intent and control'. Consider what Mohammed Javadi has noticed in the narratives of Gertrude Bell about Persia. He maintains that her love of simplicity made her cross boundaries of race, culture

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<sup>162</sup> John M Mackenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.13.

<sup>163</sup> Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.20.

and nationality to see herself as part of a global human fellowship. Valerie Kennedy, in her book about Edward Said, draws our attention to this absence of the female voice and suggests that many Western women travellers, notably Lady Mary Wortley Montague, had a very different attitude toward Eastern women. She asserts that these women 'were often sympathetic' and sometimes criticised imperialism as well.<sup>164</sup>

To sum up, I have reviewed and discussed some literature relevant to the present study, suggesting that there are almost three trends within the debate over Orientalism. The first trend, represented by Edward Said and his followers, focuses on the relationship between knowledge and power as described by Michel Foucault, and on Gramsci's notion of political and cultural domination. Thus, Edward Said, Rana Kabbani and Mohammed AL-Taha have attempted to present the negative elements of Western travel writing on the Middle East, insisting on the idea of the absolute division between West and East. Therefore, as we have seen, the dominant themes of their arguments were Western 'domination', 'otherness' and 'superiority'. The second trend challenges this approach; hence, I have labelled them 'anti-Saidians'. This trend tries to oppose Said's theory of Orientalism, insisting on the positive elements of Western discourses on the Orient. Accordingly, discussions of the aesthetic dimension and criticisms of the West in travel writing are apparent in the works of Syrine Hout and Kathryn Sampson. The third trend of Oriental studies represents a middle way between 'Saidians' and 'Anti-Saidians'. As I have mentioned previously, Mohammed Javadi, Van de Bilt and John Dixon adopt the notion of the 'heterogeniety' of colonial texts. In common with the postcolonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Lisa Lowe and Dinnes Porter, this group reject totalizing Orientalism as a monolithic and consistent discourse. Yet, they provide some different texts from different

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<sup>164</sup> Valerie Kennedy, *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p.40.



periods of time in order to demonstrate the multivalence of colonial discourse.

Consequently, I fully advocate the approach offered by the third group of Oriental studies. The diversity of voices in British travel writings on Oman is apparent, not only among different travellers and periods, but also within the work of one traveller, as will be seen in the next chapters.

## Chapter II

# Travelling the Frontiers: Ephemeral Journeys and Scattered Images

Continuing our cruise, we passed close along the coast of Oman, the “land of security” which, according to the best Arabian authorities, comprehends the south-easterly region of Arabia, extending from Cape Ras-al-Hud, on the south, to Zebarah, on the north-eastern coast.<sup>1</sup>

Oman has over 1,700 kms of coastline on the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, extending from the Strait of Hormuz in the north to Dhufar in the south. After 1650, when the Omanis ousted the Portuguese from Oman, Muscat, Sohar, Sur and Salala were the most thriving cities along this littoral. However, Muscat was distinguished by a pre-eminence in trade and by security. This maritime city, according to its strategic location at the entrance to the Gulf, was always considered by European travellers, as we shall see later, to be the best seaport in Arabia. Its position, hidden among mountains, made it a perfect harbour for merchants, sailors and adventurers. In the nineteenth century, it was frequented by British merchants, explorers, agents and representatives of the East India Company. Among the interesting topics that they covered in their travel accounts are, the tolerance of the people and their kind treatment of slaves, the ‘civilised’ manners of Sayyid Said bin Sultan, the ‘Imaum of Muscat’, the picturesqueness of Muscat and its ‘stupendous’ mountains, excessive heat and narrow streets, the splendour of Hormuz and its declining glory, and the ‘luxuriant’ soil of Dhufar. In this chapter, I will be looking at such themes and other descriptions of the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Mignan, *A Winter Journey Through Russia, The Caucasian Alps, and Georgia*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1839) I, p. 232.



coastal area of Oman written by British travellers and surveyors who visited the country during the nineteenth century. However, a few pages first will be devoted to the historical relationship between Oman and Britain, and to the pictures of the country offered in the earliest travel accounts. This will help provide the context of the writings under discussion.

## 1. Outlines of Omani-British Relations

Initial contacts between Oman and Britain go back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, when European powers, notably the Dutch and the British, were involved in feuds with the Portuguese, who had dominated the area for more than a century. It was as early as 1624 that the wealth and progress of Omani trade attracted the interests of the East India Company. Since traders from the coastal area of Oman have bartered with ports on the Indian continent from the immemorial past, it was inevitable that the English Company should have soon come into contact with these local merchants. It is not unusual, therefore, that this company gradually sought clear links with these local merchants and their rulers in its competition for domination over naval commerce with the Portuguese, Dutch and French. After Imam Nasir bin Murshed drove away the Portuguese from Sohar in 1643, the first step was actually taken by the Omanis when in 1645 the Imam invited the English Company to carry on trading officially at Sohar and Sib, at a time when Muscat was still under Portuguese occupation.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, these early contacts led to a treaty in February 1646 between the Imam Nasir bin Murshid and Philip Wylde, the envoy of the East India Company, giving the English commercial

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<sup>2</sup> Mohammed Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: Roots of British Domination* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 31.

advantages at Sohar and embodying religious toleration in which they had 'license to experience [their] own religion'.<sup>3</sup>

Friendly relations with Omani Ya'ariba rulers were upheld after this treaty, and there were several attempts made by the British to establish an English factory, or trading post, at Muscat.<sup>4</sup> In 1659, the English sent Colonel Henry Rainsford to Muscat for this purpose. He suggested that the English should have one of Muscat's forts, Mirani or Jalali, which could be defended equally by the English and the Omanis. While the negotiations were underway, however, Rainsford died and the mission failed.<sup>5</sup> It was not until 1798 that another treaty was signed between Oman and Britain. For more than a century Omanis refused English requests to establish a factory at Muscat. The reason, as Bhacker argues, could be that 'the memory of their great struggle and the eventual expulsion of the Portuguese after more than a century of occupation of Muscat must have been too fresh in their minds'.<sup>6</sup> However, the English were welcome to trade at Muscat and did so from visiting ships, without establishing a factory there.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Oman became a more and more significant trading nation. The alteration of trade between Europe and Asia from land routes to the sea route around the Cape of Good Hope opened the Indian Ocean to extensive traffic. This flourishing of Omani trade was accompanied by some historic changes. In 1785, Sayyid Hamed bin Said transferred the capital of Oman from the inland Rustaq to the more strategic Muscat on the coast. Muscat then became, as Calvin H. Allen argues, 'the most active port in the Arabian Gulf region and replaced Bandar Abbas as the principle entrepot'. In 1792, Sayyid Sultan bin Ahmed became Ruler of

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<sup>3</sup> For the full text of this treaty see Appendix 1 in: Ian Skeet, *Muscat and Oman: the End of an Era* (London: The Travel Book Club, 1975), p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> The Portuguese were expelled from Muscat in 1650 by Imam Sultan Bin Saif Al-Yarubi. For details, see B. J. Slot's *The Arabs of the Gulf 1602-1784* (Netherlands: Leidschendam, 1993), pp. 159-163.

<sup>5</sup> William Foster, *English Factories in India: 1655-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), p.230.

<sup>6</sup> Bhacker, *Trade and Empire*, p. 33.



Oman. Like his predecessor, Sayyid Sultan did his utmost to develop further Oman's commercial position. His efforts focused on the regularization of customs duties and encouragement of foreign traders, so that, by 1800, Muslim, Hindu and Jewish merchants from India, Africa, Yemen, Egypt, Persia, Makran, Indonesia and Iraq were all doing business in Muscat.<sup>7</sup>

This growth of Omani trade, on the one hand, and Napoleon's threat to invade British India, on the other hand, led the English to firm up their position in Muscat.<sup>8</sup> This increasing interest in Oman was concluded through two treaties. In 1798, the East India Company's agent in Bushire, Mirza Mahdi Khan, was sent to Muscat to sign an agreement with the Sayyid Sultan bin Ahmad, in which he responded to British demands 'to dismiss' from his service any person of the 'French nation' and guaranteed that in times of war between European nations the French and Dutch would not be permitted 'a place to fix or seat themselves in, nor shall they ever get ground to stand upon, with this state', requiring the British to defend Muscat, its trade and its shipping. Although this treaty did not grant the British permission to establish a factory at Muscat, it marked the beginning of the close political relationship with Oman which was to develop as time went on. The British authorities of India found it important to back up this agreement, and in 1800 they dispatched Captain John Malcolm to sign with Sayyid Sultan an equally significant treaty, confirming that 'an English gentleman of respectability, on part of Honorable Company, shall always reside at the port of Muscat.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Calvin H. Allen, Jr. 'The State of Masqat in the Gulf and East Africa, 1785-1829' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 14, no. 2 (1982), 117-127 (pp. 117-119).

<sup>8</sup> The account of British-French rivalry in Oman began in the second half of the eighteenth century. For more details, see Patricia Risso, *Oman and Muscat: An Early Modern History* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 139-168.

<sup>9</sup> For the full texts of both treaties, see *Arabian Gulf Intelligence*, pp. 248-250.

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed some dramatic historical events that overshadowed British-Omani relations. At the outset of 1800 Oman began to face the Wahhabi incursions, when they invaded the Buraimi Oasis, the northernmost outpost of Oman, where they made a base for their raids to the other parts of the country.<sup>10</sup> It was in this overwhelming situation that Sultan bin Ahmad refused to receive the French consul at Muscat in 1803. He now realised that Britain was the only power able to help him against his foes, and he was not ready to risk his chances for gaining British support by manoeuvring with the French at such a critical time. Additionally, because most of Muscat's traffic was with India, a coalition with British and a demonstration of respect for British wishes were, in the long run, more advantageous to Muscat's commercial interests. Thus, to rescue his trade routes with India, the historical commercial associate of Oman, Sultan bin Ahmad was compelled to make concessions to the British. Hereafter the traffic routes of the Indian Ocean, now more and more dominated by the British, meant that the mission so far carried out by Oman now passed to Britain, specifically the domination of the high seas against 'piracy', as the British persisted in calling it.<sup>11</sup> Britain was now to take part in the melee, as it was to compete not only with Muscat but also with other powers in the Gulf such as the Qawasim, all out to take control of trade in the western Indian Ocean area.<sup>12</sup> Thus, as Bhaker puts it, 'The first decade of the nineteenth century saw the interests of

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<sup>10</sup> Wahhabism was a fanatical religious movement. Founded by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92) in Nejd, Saudi Arabia, it was based on the teachings of the Hanbali sect, rejecting other Islamic sects such as Shiasim (spread in Iran) and Ibadism (spread in Oman) on the grounds that such doctrines were null. In a time, Wahhabis dominated most of the western and central parts of the Gulf. Their expansion was motivated, as Kelly confirms, by 'religious zeal, territorial ambition, and a lust for plunder'. See J. B. Kelly, *Britain and The Persian Gulf 1795-1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p.99.

<sup>11</sup> The subject of 'piracy' in the Gulf will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>12</sup> The Qawasim is a tribe that dwells mainly in Sharja and Ras Al-khyama. Their role in shaping the history of the Gulf during the nineteenth century is well known, but dealing with it here is beyond the scope of this study. For more details about the Qawasim, see Sultan Muhammad Al-Qasimi, *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf* (London: Routledge, 1988), and Charles E. Davies, *Blood-Red Arab Flag: An Investigation into Quasimi Piracy 1797-1820* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997).



Oman and Britain converging as both sought to control attacks on shipping by the Qwasim who, in turn, were supported by the Whhabis'.<sup>13</sup>

Another event that shaped the contacts between Oman and Britain was the appearance of Said bin Sultan, whose reign was between 1807 and 1856. It seems that Sayyid Said had been impressed by the British since he was young. When he was eight years old, he attended the reception ceremony for Captain John Malcolm who was dispatched to Oman in 1800 to sign the treaty mentioned above. During the ceremony, Sayyid Said, among others, had received from Malcolm a model of a British ship with mounted guns as a present.<sup>14</sup> Since these early times, his admiration of British power led him to enhance Omani relations with Britain. When he ascended the throne he sent a letter to the Governor of Bombay asserting his family allegiance to the British:

I place my reliance that the treaties of friendship which were in force in the time of my parent, Syed Sultan, between this state and the Honourable Company will continue to be observed as in the aforesaid time of my father and that both sides by the requisites of a thorough and permanent good understanding will not fail to operate without any difference or estrangement and that you will keep me truly acquainted with your objects and desires.<sup>15</sup>

Within this policy, he agreed to join and support the British in their two expeditions against the Al-Qasimi at Ras Al-Khayma in 1809, and in the final expedition of 1819 that destroyed the Al-Qasimi's power.<sup>16</sup> In consequence, this co-operation against the Wahhabi and the Al-Qasimi disposed him to sign many treaties with the British. In 1822 and 1845, he concluded agreements to prevent the slave trade from his dominions to all Christian countries, and in 1839 a Commercial Treaty

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<sup>13</sup> Bhacker, *Trade and Empire*, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> John William Kaye, *The Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir John Malcolm, G.C.B: From Unpublished Letters and Journals*, 2 vols (London: Smith, 1856), I, p. 110.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Al-Qasmi, *The Myth of Arab Piracy*, p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> For a full account of these two expeditions see Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf 1795-1880*, pp. 116-118 and 152-159.

including a 'freedom of exportation and importation'.<sup>17</sup> But the most intimate relations of Said with the British were demonstrated by his present of the Kuria Moria Islands, on the south coast of Oman, to the British Crown in 1854, though the French had made several attempts to obtain them because of their maritime significance and their value.<sup>18</sup>

Now we come up to an important stage in the history of Oman. After the death of Sayyid Said in 1856, the British managed to split the Omani empire into two parts; one in Zanzibar and another in Muscat. As I have mentioned previously, the British intervention in Oman was motivated by their interests in the increasing Omani trade and their rivalry with other European powers. Splitting the Omani empire weakened its economy and consequently made its ruling family more dependent on the British for their existence. In 1861 Sultan Thuwani signed with the British an agreement concluding that 'my faithful ally, the British Government, is at liberty to construct one or more lines of telegraph to the state of Muscat'.<sup>19</sup> Two short reigns followed and there were, as usual, local disputes and internal revolt, which reached their peak in 1871, when the authority was held by Turki, who was acknowledged as a ruler by the British in the same year. The first years of Turki's regime were marked by conflict between the rival parties Hinawi and Ghafri, and by rebel attacks from the interior against Muscat and other coastal towns. These political troubles invited British intervention. Turki's close relationship with the British culminated in 1873, when he signed, with Sir Bartle

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<sup>17</sup> For further details about these treaties and others, see Atkins Hamilton, 'Brief Notes, containing Information on Various points Concerned with His Highness the Imaum of Muskat; and the Nature of his Relations with the British Government' in *Arabian Gulf Intelligence*, pp. 235-245.

<sup>18</sup> See Charles Umpherston Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sands Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries*, 11 (Calcutta: The Government of India, 1933). Aitchison quotes as follows: 'At the request of Queen Victoria he (Sayyid Said) cedes the Kurya Murya islands by his own free will with no pressure or pecuniary reward'. (p. 302.) However, in 1967, during the reign of Said bin Taimur, the Islands were returned to Oman: 'As the inhabitants of the Kurya Murya islands expressed the wish to be returned to Oman, Britain agrees to this with effect from 30 November. The inhabitants will cease to be British subjects'. See Robin Bidwell, 'A Collection of Texts Dealing with the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman and its International Relations 1790-1970' *Journal of Oman Studies*, 6, part 1 (Oman: Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, 1983), 21-33, (p. 33).

<sup>19</sup> Arnold T. Wilson, *The Persian Gulf: A Historical Sketch from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1928), p. 235.



Frere, an agreement of suppression of the slave trade, for which he was highly regarded by the British authorities.<sup>20</sup>

Sultan Turki died in 1888 and was succeeded by his son Faisal, who was acknowledged by the British as Sultan in 1890. He expressed his 'earnest desire to be guided in all important matters of policy by the advice of the British Government'.<sup>21</sup> The first important event during Faisal's reign was the ratification, in 1891, of a 'Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation'. This treaty was to continue in strength for twelve years. It included a new stipulation whereby the Sultan was forbidden to prevent the import or export of any article of trade, and the levy of export duties was restricted to the permission of the British Government. Prior to this endorsement, it had been recommended, maybe because of the activity of the French in the Gulf, that a British protectorate over Muscat should be inaugurated, but this would have been adverse to the conditions of the Anglo-French Declaration of 1816. A treaty was signed in 1891 whereby the Sultan bound 'himself, his heirs and successors, never to cede, to sell, to mortgage, or otherwise give for occupation, save to the British Government, the dominions of Muscat and Oman or any of their dependencies'.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Sultan Faisal was so weak that when the British travellers Theodore and Mabel Bent visited him in 1889, they wrote: 'Unquestionably our own Political Agent may be said to be the ruler in Muscat'.<sup>23</sup>

During the first half of the twentieth century, events in Oman continued to develop within the context established after the collapse of the Omani empire. The ruling family in Muscat became increasingly dependent on the British government.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 236.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 237.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.237.

<sup>23</sup> James Theodore Bent and Mabel Bent, *Southern Arabia* (Reading: Granet Publishing, 1994), p. 60.

Sayyid Faisal was indebted to the government of India because of unpaid loans made to him in 1902, 1903, and 1904. Even in 1905, when the Sultan applied for a fresh loan of Rs. 20,000 in order to enable some members of his family to perform the Hajj and obtained the amount from some private creditors, he was reminded that he had committed 'a technical breach of his obligation not to borrow except from the British Government'.<sup>24</sup> Thus, when Lord Curzon visited Muscat in 1903, he was quite accurate in describing Sayyid Faisal as 'a royal feudatory of the British Crown rather than that of an independent sovereign'.<sup>25</sup>

However, British influence in Oman reached its heights during the reign of Taimur bin Faisal (1913-1932), who was satisfied to leave the affairs of government to his British advisors, to the extent that he made many trips to India and even visited Britain and Europe in 1928.<sup>26</sup> During the first half of the twentieth century, the struggle between the royal family and the interiors increased. In 1912, the British compelled the Sultan to outlaw the import of arms into Oman. Tribes of the interior considered this to be a way of controlling them and a result of the Sultan's submission to Britain.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, a new Imam came out with the support of both the major allies, the Hinnawi and the Ghafiri. To oppose this threat, the British brought 700 Anglo-Indian troops to Muscat. For many years there was conflict. Then in 1920, the Treaty of Sib was signed and this codified the relations between Muscat and the interior until the British, as Halleday argues, 'violated' it in the 1950s.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>John Gordon Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf: Oman and Central Arabia*, 2 vols (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1908), I, p. 572.

<sup>25</sup>Robert Geran Landen, *Oman Since 1865: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 267.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 408.

<sup>27</sup> About Oman and the arms trade from 1904 to 1914, see Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1894-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 270-303.

<sup>28</sup> Fred Halleday, *Arabia Without Sultans* (Manchester: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 274.



Said bin Taimur who ruled Oman from 1932 to 1970 was educated and groomed by the English in India to take over in Muscat. Unfortunately, he sealed off the country for thirty-eight years, depriving Omanis from travel, education, health services and all basics of life until the British dismissed him in 1970. However, this dictatorship could never have continued without the dynamic and frequent support of the British government. Until 1967, Said obtained over half his income from the British. In the 1960s all but one of the Sultan's consultants were British. Indeed, the country had no foreign contacts; its dealings in London were carried out, cautiously, by a trading company called Kendall & Co., who also worked as 'purchasing agents' for other Gulf regimes. When, in the 1960s, the 'question of Oman' reached the United Nations, the Sultan 'requested' Britain to represent him there.<sup>29</sup>

This manifest interference of Britain in Omani policy raises the question of whether Oman was a British colony. In the sense of occupation and ruling, Oman was not a *de facto* British colony such as India or other parts of 'the kingdom that sun never sets'. However, as we have seen, the British managed to divide the Omani empire in the second half of the nineteenth century, when they weakened its economy and compelled the ruling family to depend, always, on their support. Lord Curzon's words are appropriate to summarize the relations between Britain and Oman in the nineteenth century and prophetically hint at the inevitable end of such a close relationship:

Oman, may indeed, be justifiably regarded as a British dependency. We subsidize its ruler; we dictate its policy; we should tolerate no alien interference. I have little doubt myself that the time will some day come.... When the Union Jack will be seen flying from the castles of Muscat.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>30</sup> George Nathaniel Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, 1892), II, p. 443.

## 2. Earliest Images

Prior to 1800, when formal contact between Britain and Oman was established, few British travellers had explored the area. One of the earliest British pictures of Omanis is provided by John Fryer, who visited Muscat in 1677.<sup>31</sup> He describes them as 'a fierce treacherous people, gaining as much by fraud as merchandize'.<sup>32</sup> This evil reputation, however, should be understood within the historical perspective of Muscat at that time. It is documented that Muscat was a multi-ethnic city when Fryer visited it; Arabs, Jews and Banyans were carrying out trade there.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, such a picture might not have been intended to depict only the Omanis, but rather all inhabitants of Muscat. Moreover, it is significant to point out that, at the same time, Omanis were in rivalry with their enemies the Portuguese and other European powers, notably British and Dutch, and 'fierceness' was expected from each of those rival powers.

In 1693, however John Ovington provided a different image. He was, unlike Fryer, charmed by Omani manners and customs:

These Arabians are very courteous in their deportment, and extreme civil to all strangers; they offer neither violence nor affront to any; and tho' they are very tenacious of their own principles, and admirers of their religion, yet do they never impose it upon any, nor are their morals leven'd with such furious zeal, as to divest them of humanity,

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<sup>31</sup> John Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia*, II (London: Hakluyt Society, 1912). The English doctor and traveller John Fryer arrived at Cape Rouselaot (Ras al-Had), the promontory in the East of Oman. Describing this part of Arabia as barren, Fryer wondered how Arabia could bear the name of Happy. At night on March 9<sup>th</sup>, he saw Muschat (Muscat), 'whose vast and horrid mountains no Shade but Heaven does she hide'; as he said influenced by its high temperature (p. 155). From Muscat he sailed to Hormuz, the Straits in the north of Oman. He believes that Hormuz had been great in the past, but that it was, by the time of his visit, only famous for its clefts of salt.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 156.

<sup>33</sup> Bhacker, *Trade and Empire*, p. 14.



and a tender respect. A man may travel hundreds of miles in this country, and never meet with any abusive language, or any behaviour that looks rude.<sup>34</sup>

To justify his view, Ovington relates the testimony of Captain Edward Say, who, according to him, lived among the Omanis for many years, during which he travelled from one part of the country to another, without even being bothered by any person, though he slept sometimes in the streets and countryside; neither did Captain Say hear of anyone being robbed. Ovington also relates the story of the Omanis' 'kindness' to Captain Say after his ship-wreck on the Island of Macira on the eastern coast of Oman.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, in Ovington's account we find an early example of British travellers' attitudes to the treatment of slaves in Oman. He was impressed by their 'kindness' and 'generosity' to the slaves asserting that in the Omanis' war with the Portuguese all prisoners taken on both sides were made slaves, but that those taken by Omanis were:

used so very kindly, that they are tempted almost to be in love with their confinement, and are never us'd with any such hardships, so as to be forced to attempt an escape by flight. They neither correct them like slaves, nor impose upon them any servile work, but maintain them in ease and idleness, with a certain allowance of provision every day.<sup>36</sup>

Ovington's sympathetic attitude towards the people of Oman coincides with Henri Baudet's observation of late seventeenth century European travellers in the Islamic world, who introduced Muslims into the world of European letters not as barbarians, but

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<sup>34</sup> John Ovington, *A Voyage to Surat in the Year 1689* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), p. 251. Alexander Hamilton attacks Ovington, in the Introduction to his book *A New Account of the East Indies*, claiming that his travels 'were in map, and the knowledge he had of the countries any way remote from the aforementioned places (Bombay and Surat), was the accounts he gathered from common report; and perhaps these reports came successively to him by second or third hands'. Although I am not concerned, here, with discussing such criticism, I would mention that Hamilton's observations on Oman, as we will see later, are not so far from the context of those of Ovington.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pp. 251-252.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 254.

as 'representative of another authentic world' in which they described them as 'remarkable, interesting, and in many ways superior to the Westerner'.<sup>37</sup>

In the eighteenth century, we find more travellers to Oman than in the previous century. This is because the seventeenth century, in general, was a 'stay-at-home century', Jean-Didier Urbain argues. This century, he maintains, appeared poorly done by in terms of travellers, 'devoid of the spirit of travel', even at ends of it; the period was more inclined to pull out within its own boundaries than to open up to outside.<sup>38</sup>

Alexander Hamilton in 1715 provided more observations on Oman and its people. During his voyages between the Red Sea and China, he stopped at Muscat, finding its people, in terms as positive as Ovington's, 'remarkable for their humility and urbanity'. He gives as an example his experience in Muscat, in which he was once walking the streets and met the ruler of the city. Hamilton made way for him and his guards because the street was very narrow; but recognizing him as a stranger, the ruler told his guards to move to one side and signalled Hamilton to come forward.<sup>39</sup> Also, he observes that the 'Muskat Arabs' made no big difference about table guests; 'for the king and a common soldier, the master and slave, sit promiscuously, and dip in the same

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<sup>37</sup> Henri Baudet, *Paradise on Earth: Some Thoughts on European Images of Non-European Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 47.

<sup>38</sup> Jean-Didier Urbain, 'I Travel, Therefore I am: the "Nomad Mind" and the Spirit of Travel', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 4 (2000), 141-164, (p. 142). Urbain's opinion seems accurate here if we compare the huge body of travelogues of the nineteenth century with the travel literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries taken together. Clare Howard argues that 'travel lost its dignity in the eighteenth century. It was no longer necessary to live in foreign countries to understand them. With the foundation of the chairs of modern history at Oxford and Cambridge by King George the First in 1724, one great reason for travel was lost'. Clare Howard, *English Travellers of the Renaissance* (London: John Lane, 1913), p. 190. Regarding travel in Arabia, the contrast between the centuries is even more marked. Many chroniclers have observed that the bulk of European travel literature on Arabia was written from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Robin Fedden, for instance, maintains that by the middle of the nineteenth century, 'Arabia remained largely unexplored.' Robin Fedden, *English Travellers in the Near East* (London: Longmans, 1958), p.23.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, 2 vols (London: The Argonaut Press, 1930), I, p. 48. Hamilton describes several towns on the coastal area of Oman: Dhofar, Kuria Muria, Maceira, Ras Al-Had, Kuriat and Muscat. Like most of the travellers who visited Muscat, he was surprised by its high temperature; he claims that he saw some slaves frying fish on rocks. (p. 45).



dish'.<sup>40</sup> However, Hamilton expresses some different views about Omanis elsewhere. In a passage about the story of the aforementioned Captain Edward Say and his shipwreck, Hamilton suggests that 'the inhabitants on the main continent (of Oman) seem[ed] to be sorcerers', because the Arabs saved the English from the shipwreck had known about this accident eight days before it took place from their '*Fakee*' or religious scholar. The *Fakee* had predicted:

that, near such a time, a ship would be lost there [in *Maceira*] and pressed them to go to assistance of the ship-wrack'd people, who would be glad to come under contact with them, to have one half of what was gotten out of the wrack; and conjured his auditory to perform their part faithfully, which accordingly they did; tho' at other times the *Badows* are perfidious, treacherous and cruel.<sup>41</sup>

Regardless of the veracity of this story, what it shows are the preconceptions some Western travellers had about the East. On the basis of this story, Hamilton unjustifiably states that the Arabs of Oman were 'sorcerers'. Moreover, he insists on depicting them with words such as 'perfidious', 'treacherous' and 'cruel', although he admits that they were 'kind and benevolent' with the English.

A year after Hamilton's visit, we encounter a traveller who offers descriptions of Omanis similar to those of Fryer. In 1716 Captain Henry Cornwall portrayed the natives of Muscat with these words:

The inhabitants are Arabs, who are little better than Pirates, fiery and treacherous, making more advantage by fraud, cheating, and pilfering, than by fair trading, which makes this Port very dangerous and inconvenient to Strangers, and I would advice every trader that comes hither to have all his Eye-Teeth about him, or he'll get nothing by his Market.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pp. 41-42..

<sup>42</sup> Henry Cornwall, *Observations upon Several Voyages to India out and Home* (London: [no. pub.], 1720), p. 42. Cornwall provides a very short account about Muscat accompanied by his drawing of some beautiful pictures of the area, though he did not like the place because 'The Air here is very hot, unwholesome, and unpleasant, the Water but indifferent, and all provision except Fish, dear and scarce'. p.42.

It seems that Cornwall, as Bidwell points out, depended much on Fryer in his portrayal.<sup>43</sup> Most of the details he provides about the people and the land are available in Fryer's account. However, at the time when Cornwall visited Muscat, encounters between the Omanis and the British in the Indian Ocean had started. The Omanis seized a British ship that was trading along the coast between Surat and Mokha, claiming that this operation was revenge for the massacre that the British committed against them in 1704 at Surat. This made the British so furious that their administrators declared that the British war in Europe was the only thing that prevented them from attacking and destroying Muscat, which they called 'the stronghold of pirates'.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Cornwall's accusation of the inhabitants of Muscat for treachery and piracy was associated with the conflict between his government and the Omanis in the Indian Ocean.

Later in 1775 Abraham Parsons provided another prospect of Muscat. He, unlike Fryer and Cornwall, did not find the natives 'treacherous' or 'pirates'.<sup>45</sup> Instead, he considered Muscat as 'a place of very great trade', and he saw vast quantities of goods in the city: 'They are piled up in the streets, and lie night and day exposed, without any watch or guard, yet there never happens an instance that such goods are robbed, or even pilfered, of the least part'.<sup>46</sup> He believes that the port was 'both safe and convenient', and

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<sup>43</sup> Robin Bidwell 'Bibliographical Notes on European Accounts of Muscat 1500-1900' *Arabian Studies*, London, 4 (1978), 123-159 (p. 132).

<sup>44</sup> Slot, *The Arabs of the Gulf*, p.228.

<sup>45</sup> Abraham Parsons (?-1785) was an English traveller, merchant and consul. He visited several countries such as Turkey, Asia Minor, Aleppo, Iraq, Persia, Oman and India in command of merchant ships. He left a manuscript of his journeys to his brother-in-law, John Berjew who edited and published it in 1808 as *Travels in Asia and Africa*. His article 'A Phenomenon at Bussorah' was published in the same year in *Nicholson's Journal*. See H. Manners Chichester, 'Parsons, Abraham' in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by Sidney Lee (London: Smith, 1895), XLIII, pp. 395-396.

<sup>46</sup> Parsons, *Travels in Asia and Africa* (London: Longman, 1808), p. 207. Parsons visited Oman during his voyage from Bushar to Bombay. First he reached Hormuz, believing that it 'was the richest spot in the known world', but he found it 'with no consideration' and its inhabitants very poor (p. 205). He arrived in Muscat in the beginning of August, when there was excessive heat. He describes its trade, fortifications and port, asserting that 'it has always been an usual custom for all English merchant ships, in their voyage from India to Bussora, to stop at Muscat' (p. 208). This explains the many travel accounts, though short, about Oman in the nineteenth century.



for the many provisions of Muscat, no blockade would have any bad effect on it. Nevertheless, we find in Parsons's account an early indication, within British travel writing on Oman, of a hegemonic discourse. He declares: 'While they are at peace with the English they have no other power to fear, and it is certainly the interest of the English to live in amity with the Muscateers'.<sup>47</sup> This early feeling of British supremacy could be supported by the fact that the British position in the Gulf was stronger than any European power during the second half of the eighteenth century due to their victories over the French from 1756 to 1763.<sup>48</sup> In general, such national feeling does not only reflect the British travellers' confidence in their colonial power, but also reveals their justification for its domination. Victor Kiernan argues that in the eighteenth century, a belief was set up in the British mind 'that India without British rule must fall a prey to anarchy and invasion'.<sup>49</sup>

Another traveller in the last decade of the eighteenth century depicted Muscat with this gloomy picture: 'Muskat is an ill-built town, consisting wholly of mud houses, surrounded with immense high rocks of close to the town, that the reflection from the sun, together with the obtrusion of the wind, render it insufferably hot'. However, he found the people 'handsome, brave, and perfectly free from any *auvaise honte*'.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 208.

<sup>48</sup> Slot, *The Arabs of the Gulf*, p. 359.

<sup>49</sup> Victor Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: European Attitudes to Other Cultures in the Imperial Age* (London: Sserif, 1995), p.34.

<sup>50</sup> Mathew Jenour, *Route to India through France, Germany, Hungary, Turkey, Natolia, Syria, and the Desert of Arabia* (London: [no. pub], 1791), p.35.

### 3. Romantic Travellers

The outset of the nineteenth century, as mentioned, witnessed two significant events. The first was the treaty of 1800, which marked formal contact between Oman and Britain and opened a wide range of relations. The second event was the presence of Sayyid Said Bin Sultan who became the ruler of Oman in 1807. This Sultan was renowned for his open relations with the Europeans, probably because he was ambitious to widen his power beyond Omani boundaries, and he therefore made a point of receiving visiting Englishmen and usually attempted to impress them with his agreeable manners and by calling upon them in return.<sup>51</sup> These two changes in Omani history brought about an increase in the number of European travellers in general, and British travellers in particular, throughout the century.<sup>52</sup>

Sir John Malcolm visited Muscat in 1800, as mentioned, as a representative of the British Government to sign a treaty with Sayyid Sultan bin Ahmed. Malcolm included his account of Muscat in *Sketches of Persia* (1827).<sup>53</sup> When he saw the city

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<sup>51</sup> Robin Bidwell, *Travellers in Arabia* (Reading: Granet Publishing, 1994), p. 199.

<sup>52</sup> It seems that the nineteenth century was the golden age of travel literature throughout the world. Susan Bassnett argues that 'it cannot be accidental that the previous great age of travel writing was the nineteenth century, the period when Britain was the greatest power in the world'. Also, Lynne Withey maintains that a bibliography of books written by European travellers to the Middle East in the nineteenth century, 'now among the holdings of a research library in Athens, includes 1, 004 titles'. See: Susan Bassnett, 'Travel Writing Within British Studies', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 3 (1999), 1-16 (p. 6), and Lynne Withey, *Grand Tours and Cook's Tours: A History of Leisure Travel, 1750 to 1915* (London: Aurum Press, 1998), p. 234.

<sup>53</sup> This book was first published in 1827 in London by John Murray, and then reprinted by the same publisher in the years 1828, 1845, and 1861. In 1888, it was republished by Cassell. Sir John Malcolm (1769-1833) was a Scottish soldier, diplomatist, officer and author. He served in the Indian army since he was twelve. He learnt Persian, and was appointed in 1799 as representative to the court of Persia in order to work against the policy of the French. In 1800, he was successful in signing with Oman and other Gulf states importance political and commercial treaties. In 1811, he returned to England and devoted his time to writing literary books, especially on the history of Persia. Beside his *Sketches of Persia*, he wrote: *Persia: A Poem* (London: John Murray, 1814), *The History of Persia, From the Most Early Period to the Present Time*, 2 vols (London: Murray, 1815), *A Memoir of Central India, Including Malwa, and Adjoining Provinces*, 2 vols (London: Kingsbury, 1823), *The Political History of India, From 1784 to 1823*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1826), *Miscellaneous Poems* (Bombay: [n. pub.], 1829), *The Government of India* (London: J. Murray, 1833), *The Life of Robert, Lord Clive*, 3 vols (London: John Murray, 1836). For more details, see Kaye, *The Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir John Malcolm*.



from on board, he was shocked by its unpleasant aspect, and sought to apologize to his readers who, probably, were expecting something romantic:

Now, if I understood perspective and retrospective, how I would delight my readers by contrasting the barren, rocky bills of Arabia, where not a trace of vegetable nature is to be found, with the shaded shores of Ceylon, and the dark forests that cloth the lofty mountains of Malabar! But I am not a picturesque traveller.<sup>54</sup>

Because he was not 'a picturesque traveller', Malcolm paid more attention to the manners and customs of the people. Many Western travellers to the East have talked about the 'despotism' of Eastern rulers, but Malcolm had a different point of view.<sup>55</sup> Commenting on the regime of the 'Imam' of Muscat, he believes that Imam's authority, like that of many Arabian rulers, was 'more of a patriarchal than despotic character'.<sup>56</sup> To justify this view, Malcolm gives an example from his experience in Muscat when he met the 'Imam' of Muscat Sultan bin Ahmed and found him, while possessed of some dignity, in very simple dress:

He had a shawl rolled round his head as a turban, and the Arab cloak, which hung over his plain robes, was of white broadcloth, no way ornamented; he wore no jewels, and had no arms, not even a dagger, about his person; his manner was plain and manly, and marked his active, enterprising character. The eyes of his crew (Arabs, Nubians, and Abyssinians) [...] were usually fixed on their prince; but their countenance indicated affection, not fear; and I could not but observe that he never looked at or spoke to any of them but with kindness.<sup>57</sup>

According to Malcolm, another aspect of this simplicity was the 'hearty manner' of greetings shown by the Imam's captains in which they saluted their friends, of

<sup>54</sup> John Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia: From the Journals of a Traveller in the East*, 2 vols (London: Cassell, 1888), I, p. 21.

<sup>55</sup> For example, Rhoad Murphey argues that almost every European traveller who visited Turkey in the eighteenth century 'devoted a long chapter or sermon' to the topic of the 'Ottoman despotism' and 'abuse of state power'. See Rhoad Murphey, 'Bigots or Informed Observers? A Periodization of Pre-Colonial English and European Writing on the Middle East', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 110, no. 2 (1990), 291-303 (p. 301).

<sup>56</sup> Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia*, p. 21.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.



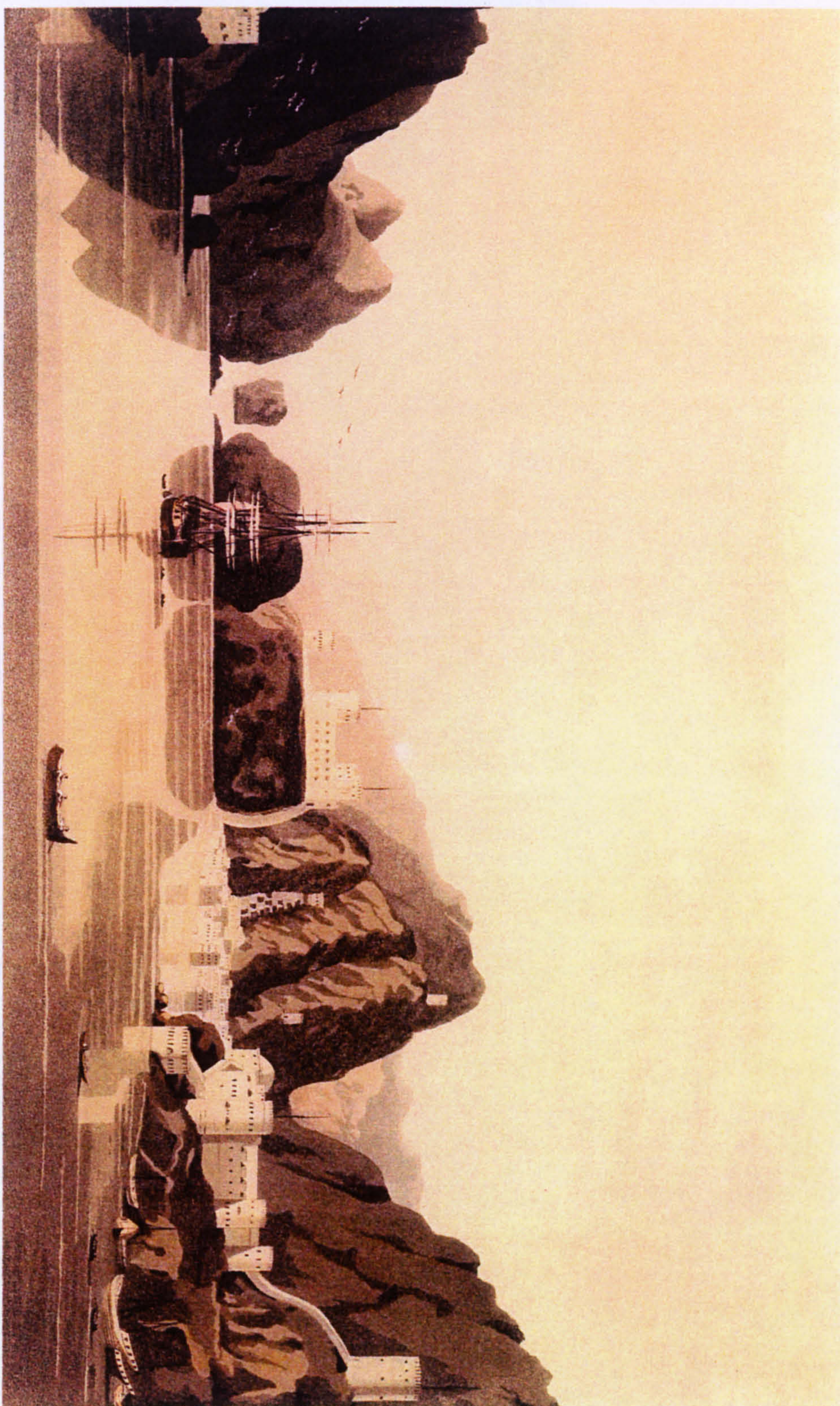


Figure 2 – Chart of the harbour of Muscat, by Aron Arrowsmith, 1813



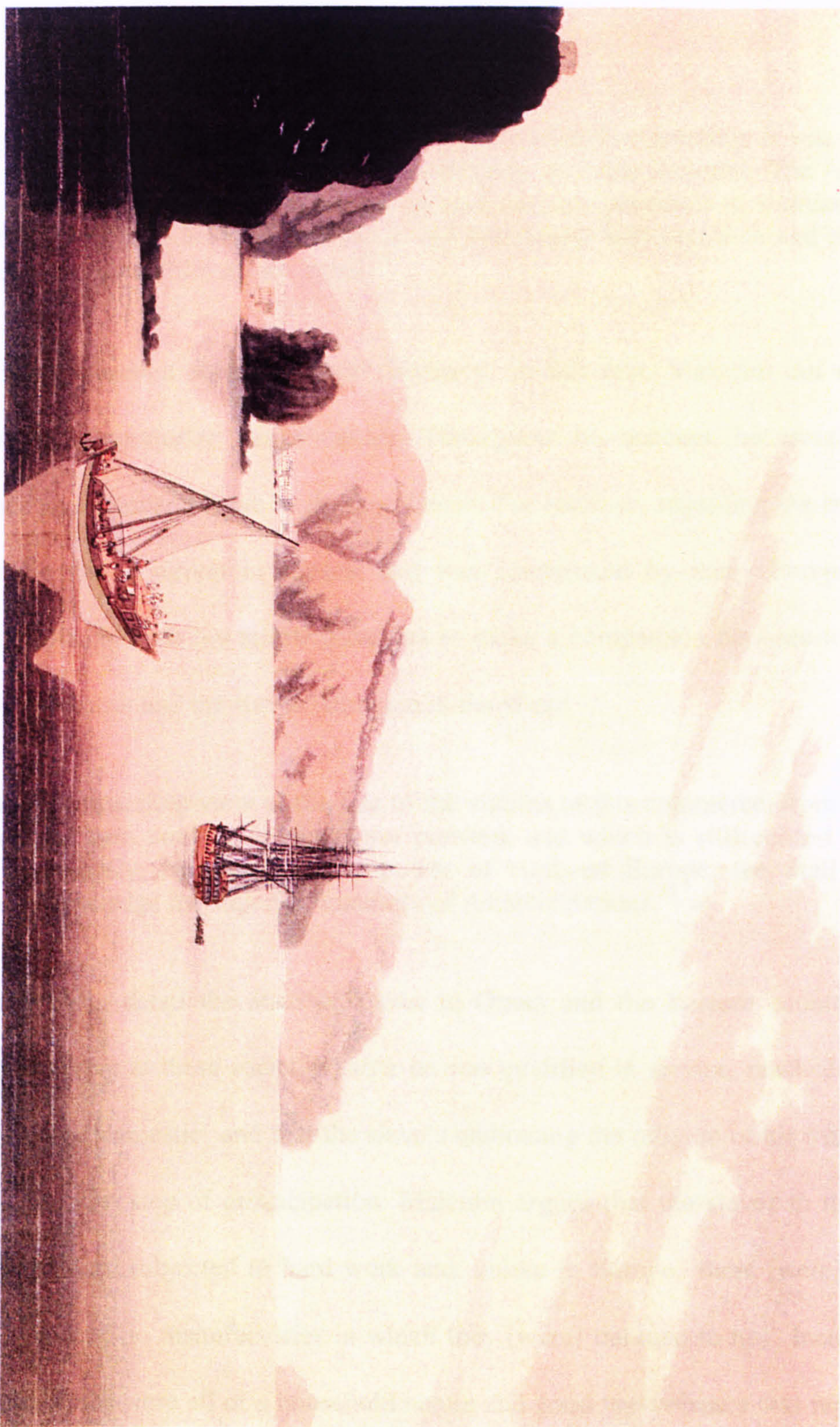


Figure 3 – Chart of Muttrah, by Aron Arrowsmith, 1813



different military ranks, very cordially with the Islamic salutation 'Salam alicum' (Peace be upon you), and the traditional Omani welcome of shaking right hands and raising them up. In this connection, Malcolm criticises the opposite complicated manners of the West:

What appeared singular, was the extent of this cordial and familiar greeting; it was not limited by those rules which are found necessary in more civilised societies. The Arab sailor, however low his occupation, exhibited an ease and independence in addressing the commanders, which showed that, as far as the intercourse between man and man was concerned, he deemed himself his equal.<sup>58</sup>

Whatever might be argued about the term 'civilised' in this text, Malcolm did not, obviously, mean to inferiorize native culture. Throughout his account, he criticises Western values and compares them to those in Oman. For instance, regarding the trade of slaves, which was common in Muscat and was condemned by many European travellers, Malcolm reminds his fellow travellers to make a comparison between what they observed in Muscat and the slaves' situation in the West:

When we take a comparative view of the fate of the victims of this commerce, from the stain of which our own country is hardly yet purified, and which is still carried on, openly or clandestinely, by almost every power of civilised Europe, we shall be compelled to acknowledge the superior humanity of Asiantic nations.<sup>59</sup>

Then he describes in detail the state of slaves in Oman and the Eastern countries, asserting that the slave in these societies, after he was qualified in service, reached the status of a 'favoured domestic' and that the slave's embracing the religion of his master was generally the first step of emancipation. Malcolm argues that the slaves in these countries were seldom subjected to hard work and, unlike in Europe, 'there [were] no fields tilled by slaves, no manufactories in which they [were] doomed to toil'. Instead, he confirms, their jobs were all of a household nature and good performance was repaid

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 26.



by 'kindness and confidence', which upgraded them in their community. Also, he continues, they got married and their children became, in manner, 'part of their master's family', maybe even inheriting a share of his fortune. Moreover, Malcolm asserts that according to Islamic law, Muslims were encouraged to emancipate their slaves.<sup>60</sup>

Elsewhere, Malcolm continues his campaign against what he calls 'second-hand' opinions. Once, a British friend of his, while Malcolm was talking to him positively about the natives of Muscat, 'burst into a fit of laughter' and said he could show him a very opposite picture of them, and then he brought out a journal made by a 'blunt fellow' in which was written 'Inhabitants of Muscat: As to manners, they have none; and their customs are very beastly'.<sup>61</sup> Commenting on such a stereotype, Malcolm asserts,

It is the eye, the disposition, and the judgment of the observer, more than what is actually seen, that stamps the condition of distant nations with those who have to form their opinion at second-hand; and the generality of readers, who have their happiness grounded on a natural prejudice in favour of their own ways and usages, lean toward such as minister to their pride and patriotism by throwing a dark shade on all they meet different from Old England.<sup>62</sup>

Such self-critique at the outset of the nineteenth century runs against the monolithic perspective suggested by Edward Said and his followers, discussed in the first chapter. Malcolm here provides a good example that challenges the notion of charging all Western writing on the Orient with bias and hostility.

In 1816 Oman was visited by two travellers, William Heude and James Silk Buckingham.<sup>63</sup> The former arrived in November, the latter in December. Both of them

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, pp. 26-28.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> I could not obtain any bibliographical information about William Heude, and it seems that his *Voyage up the Persian Gulf* was the only work left by him. However, James Silk Buckingham (1786-1855) was a famous English author, traveller, journalist, and Member of Parliament. He established in 1818 the *Calcutta Journal*, which brought him fame in the beginning, but in 1823 the journal's open criticism of the East India Company caused him to be evicted from India. Buckingham carried on his journalistic endeavours in England, and started the *Oriental Herald* (1824) and the *Athenaeum* (1828). He travelled

provide different pictures of the Bedouins of Oman. Heude, after speaking of the diverse races in Muscat consisting of Arabs, Jews, Hindus, Belushis, Turks and Africans, was struck by the appearance of the desert Arabs:

The wild Bedouin might be distinguished from amongst the first, by a striped kerchief surrounded with lashes of whip-chord, and flying loosely round his head; by a coarse shirt, a square striped cumlin over his shoulders, and a chubook; wild, and uncontrolled; with a quick burning eye, an animated and restless countenance: he appeared the lord of the creation, and even in his physiognomy the lawless robber of a desert land.<sup>64</sup>

Picturing the Arab Bedouin as 'the lord of creation' might not be anomalous here. In the Romantic period, Tim Fulford argues, the Bedouin Arab, who features in Wordsworth's account of Coleridge's dream fleeing from 'the fleet of waters of the drowning world', is 'a prophet of apocalypse'.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, Buckingham distinguishes the inhabitants of

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extensively in Europe, America and the East, and wrote a number of books describing these travels. Some of his important works, in addition to *Travels in Assyria* which will be discussed in this chapter, include: *Travels Among the Arab Tribes Inhabiting the Countries East of Syria and Palestine* (London: Longman, 1825), *Sketch of a Voyage to the India and China Seas, Including Japan and the Pacific Islands* (London: [n. pub], 1830), *America, Historical, Statistic, and Descriptive*, 3 vols (London: Fisher, 1841), *Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the Other British Provinces in North America* (London: Fisher, 1843), *Belgium, the Rhine, Switzerland, and Holland: an Autumnal Tour*, 2 vols (London: Fisher, 1848), *France, Piedmont, Italy, Lombardy, the Tyrol, and Bavaria : an Autumnal Tour*, 2 vols (London: Fisher, 1848), *Palestine, and the regions beyond Jordan* (Dunfermline, 1850), *The Buried City of the East: Nineveh* (London : National Illustrated Library, 1851), *Autobiography of J.S.B.; Including His Voyages, Travels, Adventures, Speculations, Successes and Failures*, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1855). For more details, see Ralph Edmund Turner, *James Silk Buckingham, 1786-1855: A Social Biography* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1934).

<sup>64</sup> William Heude, *A Voyage up the Persian Gulf and a Journey Overland from India to England in 1817* (London: Strahan and Spottiswoode, 1819), pp. 22-23.

<sup>65</sup> Tim Fulford, 'Romanticism and Colonialism: Races, Places, Peoples, 1800-1830' in *Romanticism and Colonialism*, ed. by Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.35-47 (p. 44).

The fifth book of Wordsworth's *Prelude* provides this example of the Romantic dream:

'I saw before me stretched a boundless plain  
Of sandy wilderness, all black and void,  
And as I looked around, distress and fear  
Came creeping over me, when at my side,  
Close at my side, an uncouth shape appeared  
Upon a dromedary, mounted high.  
He seemed an Arab of the Bedouin tribes:  
A lance he bore, and underneath one arm  
A stone, and in the opposite hand a shell  
Of a surpassing brightness.'

See William Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Andrew J. George, Cambridge edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932), pp.71-80.



Muscat, who mostly were multi-ethnics, from the 'Desert Arabs' whom he attacks as 'savage' and 'barbarous and uninformed as men could possibly be'.<sup>66</sup>

Another view that Heude articulates about Omanis pertains to their religious sect, Ibadisim: 'The people of Maskat [...] belong to the sect of Abadi [...] and are extremely tolerant. They are also equally plain in their manners, [and] make little distinction in their conduct and deportment towards those of another religion'.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, Buckingham, though he did not mention their religion, was highly impressed by their tolerance and civility:

One great distinguishing feature of Muscat, over all other Arabian towns, is respect and civility shown by all classes of its inhabitants to Europeans [...] Here [...] an English man may go every where unmolested [...] The tranquillity that reigns throughout the town, and the tolerance and civility shown to strangers of every denomination, are to be attributed to the inoffensive disposition of the people, rather than any excellence of police, as it has been thought.<sup>68</sup>

In general, images such as these about Islam prevail in the British writing of the Romantic period. Thomas Prasch claims that a 'sympathetic revaluation of Islam had been underway throughout the nineteenth century, initially fueled by Romantic Orientalism'.<sup>69</sup> The natives of Muscat were singled as exhibiting the quality of 'tolerance', as we have seen from the texts above. Buckingham, elsewhere, has described the Arabs of Muscat as 'the most civilized of their countrymen'.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, when Buckingham describes the Arabs of Macira in the east part of Oman, he considers them, in contrast, as 'a cruel and inhospitable race'. Such a view of the inhabitants of

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<sup>66</sup> James Silk Buckingham, *Travels in Assyria, Media, and Persia*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), II, pp. 413-414.

<sup>67</sup> Heude, *A Voyage up the Persian Gulf*, p. 23.

<sup>68</sup> Buckingham, *Travels in Assyria*, p. 417.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Prasch, 'Which God for Africa: The Islamic-Christian Missionary Debate in Late Victorian England', *Victorian Studies*, 33, no. 1 (1989): 51-73. p. 55.

<sup>70</sup> Buckingham, *Travels in Assyria*, p. 418.

Macira is, seemingly, no more than a stereotyped image. Hamilton, as we have seen, used the same words to describe them in 1715. Buckingham also characterises the people of Muscat as exhibiting neatness and simplicity; they appeared to him 'the cleanest, neatest, best dressed, and most gentlemanly of all the Arabs that [he] had ever seen'. He adds that, 'no thing can suppress the simplicity of their appearance, or the equality of value between the dresses of the wealthiest and the lowest classes'.<sup>71</sup> He witnessed this simplicity in the principle merchants:

some sitting on old rust cannon, others on condemned spars, and others in the midst of coils of rope, exposed on the wharf, stroking their beards, counting their beads, and seeming to be the greatest of idlers, instead of men of business; notwithstanding which, when a stranger gets among them, he finds commerce to engross all their conversation and their thoughts.<sup>72</sup>

Along with Malcolm, Heude also emphasises on the kindness that slaves received in Oman. According to him, slaves at Muscat were not exposed to hard work. Furthermore, he says:

they live at their master's, board and sleep under his roof, eating of his dish, and drinking of his cup; and are never again exposed to *public* sale, unless they misbehave; a good and faithful slave being so much valued, that when distress obliges his master to part with him, he disposes of him to some private friend, who esteems him the more for his approved fidelity.<sup>73</sup>

Some information about the contrasting condition of slaves in British colonies at the time sheds light on the credibility of these Romantic travellers' perceptions. Frank Wesley Pitman, in his study of the British treatment of slaves in the West Indies, states that 'the status of the *Negro* was early defined in the law of Barbados as part of the personal estate of the master, subject to his almost unlimited control and disposition'.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 413.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 415.

<sup>73</sup> Heude, *A Voyage up the Persian Gulf*, p. 25.



According to Pitman, slaves were not to go off their plantations without permits stating the time for their return. And, he claims, they were prohibited from carrying weapons, beating drums, and attending public meetings. Also, he asserts, if a slave hit a Christian, for the first offence he was to be cruelly thrashed; for the second offence his nose was to be 'slit and he was to be burned in the face'.<sup>74</sup> Such brutal treatment of slaves, therefore, affected the sensibilities of some British humanitarians in the late eighteenth century, and led ultimately to the emancipation movement.

Another British traveller, John Johnson, gave his testimony in 1817 about slaves in Oman. Indeed, he made a comparison between the status of slaves of Muslim families and those of some European families, namely the Portuguese and Dutch. Johnson observes that the state of a slave in Muslim family 'resembles that of an adopted child', giving the individual some rights to the possessions of his master. Additionally, he asserts that a slave was soon employed as an assistant and manager in trade, and authorised to a considerable amount of his owner's possessions, a part of which was normally given to him as a house when he married. Johnson argues that:

through this kind of adoption, the feelings of masters, and of course their conduct, in regard to their slaves, are quite different from those that prevail in the families of the Portuguese and Dutch, who very often treat these hapless dependents harshly, beating them, and degrading them with marked contempt and unrelenting oppression. They seem even to regard them as deserving less care and attention than brute animals.<sup>75</sup>

Johnson did not stop at this point in his comparison, but also criticised his countrymen's behaviour in India. He remarks that the slaves of the Abyssinian race were 'called by the Christians Caffers', a term taken over from Muslims, who apply it to nonbelievers.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Frank Wesley Pitman, 'The Treatment of the British West Indian Slaves in Law and Custom', *Journal of Negro History*, 11, no. 4. (1926), 610-628 (p. 613).

<sup>75</sup> John Johnson, *A Journey from India to England through Persia, Georgia, Russia, Poland, and Prussia in the Year 1817* (London: Paternoster-Row, 1818), pp. 12-13.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

However, in the same text Johnson also complains, as a European, of the absence of the good manners of what he calls the 'enlightened nations'.<sup>77</sup>

It seems that the idea of 'chronological primitivism', which, Abrams argues, first gained evidence in the seventeenth century and culminated in the nineteenth century, was already in the minds of some British travellers in this period.<sup>78</sup> We have seen previously Malcolm's impressions of the 'simple dress' of the Imam of Muscat and the 'hearty manner' of its natives. Here also, we find Johnson observing the 'unchanging habits' of the natives:

Indeed, a stranger entering Arabia, however little conversant with sacred history, cannot but be struck with the patriarchal character of the inhabitants, observable in the simplicity of their dress and their modes of life, which do not seem to have undergone much variation since the time of our Saviour. It is evident, that the dress or tunic of the monks in Roman Catholic countries is a copy of that which is still commonly worn in Arabia, in shape, texture, and even colour.<sup>79</sup>

As Johnson was 'struck' with these 'unchanging habits' and the 'simplicity' of the natives, it is implicit here that such impressions include a kind of cultural self-criticism. Henri Baudet maintains that the whole complex of primitivism and Orientalism in Western writing 'undoubtedly contained a substantial element of rejection and renunciation' of a civilization that was felt to be both a 'burden and a path leading in the wrong direction'.<sup>80</sup> It is perhaps because of his primitivist perspective that Johnson preferred the appearance of the desert Arabs to that of the town dwellers: 'The Buddoos of the interior whom we met, appeared a more cleanly race of men than the inhabitants of the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>78</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1999), p. 244.

<sup>79</sup> Johnson, *A Journey from India to England*, p. 14.

<sup>80</sup> Baudet, *Paradise on Earth*, p. 55.



towns; they had fine open countenances, and manly, free, and bold address'.<sup>81</sup> This is an entirely different picture of this race of people from that offered by Buckingham.<sup>82</sup>

Johnson provides a gloomy vision of Muscat's appearance and general situation. He believes that in Muscat, there was great danger from attacks of fever which have more often 'proved fatal to Europeans'. It was no surprise, he asserts, to find that 'endemic diseases' were widespread in Muscat, because the 'site of the town is very low, and nearly encompassed by high and rocky mountains, open only in one direction, from which winds seldom blow'. Also, he adds, the heat was 'so oppressive' during summer that the inhabitants were compelled to migrate from the town to the suburbs where the date plantations could lessen the high temperature; even the Sultan himself generally resided at Barka, a village in the north west of Muscat, to 'avoid the unhealthiness of the town'. Indeed, he concludes, the only kind of people who could 'bear living on this unwholesome spot, [were] the blacks of the Abyssinian coast, to the southward of the Red Sea, with curled or woolly hair'.<sup>83</sup> In Matrah, a village near Muscat, he found the houses were 'flat-roofed' and their walls were of a horrible yellow colour with dust and filth which, he believes, affected the vision of its people, for 'sore eyes' were enormously prevalent among them. Moreover, he saw many 'mat-huts of beggars', and these people were forbidden to enter the villages, 'because they were afflicted with leprosy'.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Johnson, *A Journey from India to England*, p. 12.

<sup>82</sup> In general, the Romantic image of the Bedouin in Western travel literature is a kind of idealisation. Heude and Johnson might have had a quick communication with the Bedouins in Muscat. However, Jean Louis Burckhardt, the Swiss traveller who travelled and lived with the Bedouins of northern Arabia in 1814, provided the same idealised portrait. He described the desert Arabs as 'the only people of the East that can with Morejustice be entitled true lovers'. See Burckhardt, *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), I, p. 273.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson, *A Journey from India to England*, p. 9.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

Thomas Lumsden, Lieutenant of the Bengal Horse Artillery, called at Muscat in 1820 while travelling from India to London. He, in common with Johnson, found Muscat a 'poor, dirty, miserable place', the houses being generally 'shabby', and the streets and the bazaars 'extremely narrow'.<sup>85</sup> Lumsden provides an early image of women in Oman. He was touring in the 'narrow' bazaars of Muscat when he saw 'assemblage of people of all eastern nations', he was struck by the appearance of the women:

The women attracted our attention from the peculiarity of their dress. They wore a veil of black or blue cloth over the face, with holes for the eyes: and they were not less amused with our appearance than we were with theirs, many turning round and laughing loudly as we passed them.<sup>86</sup>

Lumsden follows this picture with some comments insisting that 'this mode of disguising' was accepted in all the Muslim countries, in which the women were 'shut up in the Harem, and entirely secluded from the world'. For him, this way of dressing, therefore, gave women the advantage of seeing without being seen, which allowed them 'a degree of liberty' that the younger of their sex were 'indulged' in. Lumsden's surprise with the women's dress in Oman was not strange. Probably no other aspect of Eastern life so much struck the European, Anita Damiani argues, 'as the Oriental custom of confining women behind veils and inside harems'.<sup>87</sup> More noteworthy in Lumsden's view of these Eastern women, is his attempt to link the women's disguise with 'liberty';

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<sup>85</sup> Thomas Lumsden, *A Journey from Merut in India to London through Arabia, Persia, Armenia, Georgia, Russia, Austria, Switzerland, and France, during the years 1819 and 1820* (London: Black, Kingsbury, Parbury & Allen, 1822), p. 63. It seems that some British travellers in the Romantic period tended to describe any city except London, as having dirty and narrow streets. Arthur Young, who visited France and Italy in the last decades of the eighteenth century, depicts Paris and Rome with the same words. He says of the former 'it is almost incredible to a person used to London how dirty the streets of Paris are, and how horrible inconvenient and dangerous walking is a foot-pavement'. Of the latter, he writes 'it has every circumstance that can render it detestable; dirt; negligence, filth, vermin, and impudence'. See Arthur Young, *Travels in France and Italy during the Years 1787, 1788 and 1789* (London: Dent, 1915), p. 76, and p. 261.

<sup>86</sup> Lumsden, *A Journey from Merut*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>87</sup> Anita Damiani, *Enlightened Observers: British Travellers to the Near East 1715-1850* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1979), p. 160.



this is unusual in male Western writings on the Orient. At this point, Lumsden's perception overlaps with what Lady Mary Montagu noticed about Turkish women in the eighteenth century. She believes that Turkish women, disguised in their 'perpetual masquerade', had 'more liberty' than Western women:

'tis impossible for the most jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her, and no man dare either touch or follow a woman in the street. This perpetual masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without fear of discovery.<sup>88</sup>

In Lumsden's account we also find some political observations about the British relations with the natives of the Gulf. He describes the contact between the two in these words:

Muscat is undoubtedly a thriving place, and likely to rise to far greater importance than it has yet attained; and I think it probable that the intercourse between the Arabians and the British on the continent of India, and the Asiatic settlements of other European nations, must ere long tend to enlighten the minds and ameliorate the condition of the people of Arabia.<sup>89</sup>

Obviously enough, in this passage Lumsden associates the 'enlightenment' of the Arabs' minds and the 'amelioration' of their status with the British presence in their lands. This point about Western travellers has been raised by some postcolonial scholars, who have charged some travellers to the Orient with attempting to justify European occupation. Gayatri Spivak argues that Western discourse ratified the 'justification of imperialism as a civilizing mission'.<sup>90</sup> In Lumsden's text, the concept of 'civilizing mission' is based on the premise that the people of Arabia needed to be 'enlightened' and raised from their misery. Jenny Sharpe argues that although the term

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<sup>88</sup> Lady Mary Montagu, *Embassy to Constantinople: The Travels of Lady Mary Montagu*, ed. by Christopher Pick (London: Gentury Hutchinson, 1988), p. 111.

<sup>89</sup> Lumsden, *A Journey from Merut*, p. 69.

<sup>90</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Cultures*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313 (p. 297).

'civilizing mission', was generally linked with a self-conscious form of imperialism starting in the 1870s, the notion of colonialism as a 'moral obligation' to expand Western civilization appeared long before imperialism was defined as such.<sup>91</sup> Elsewhere in his account, Lumsden asserts that he was more than an individual traveller. Rather, he was taking up his government's political view regarding intervention in the area. He describes some rebel natives who opposed the British presence in the Gulf as 'blood-thirsty pirates'.<sup>92</sup>

Captain Robert Mignan first visited Muscat in 1820.<sup>93</sup> Mignan declares that Oman was a 'land of security'.<sup>94</sup> He describes the face of the whole country as 'mountainous, rugged, and sterile'; even the rough parts of Europe, he asserts, were as nothing in contrast:

Here are vast precipices, for those summits the eye seeks in vain through the mists and clouds which overhang them; and rocks piled above each other as if by some powerful giant in his revelry. One might almost suppose the evil genii were confined within them by the resistless signet of the kaliph Soolimaun: for it requires no great stretch of the imagination to conceive that the rugged grandeur of these stupendous rocks was owing to their convulsive struggles for freedom, and the absence of all vegetation, to the blighting effects of their pestiferous presence.<sup>95</sup>

When we read, in the Romantic period, such a landscape description imbued, magniloquently, with expressions such as 'the eye seeks in vain through the mists and clouds', 'powerful giant', 'the evil genii were confined within them', and 'their

<sup>91</sup> Jenny Sharpe, 'Figures of Colonial Resistance', in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 99-103 (p. 100).

<sup>92</sup> Lumsden, *A Journey from Merut*, p. 65.

<sup>93</sup> Mignan wrote two travel books: *Travel in Chaldaea, Including a Journey from Bussorah to Bagdad, Hillah, and Babylon, Performed on Foot in 1827* (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1829), and *A Winter Journey through Russia, the Caucasian Alps, and Georgia; thence across Mount Zagros, by the pass of Xenophon and the Ten Thousand Greeks, into Koordistaun*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1839). Only the second work is of relevance to Oman.

<sup>94</sup> Mignan, *A Winter Journey*, II, p. 232.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 237-238.



convulsive struggles for freedom', we recall the idea of the 'sublime'. M. H. Abrams states that during the eighteenth century and after, travellers and landscape painters set out to the English Lake District and to the Alps looking for 'sublime scenery' that was entrancingly 'vast, dark, wild, stormy and ominous'. He argues that writers of what was called 'the sublime ode' sought to attain effects of 'wilderness and obscurity in their descriptive style and abrupt transitions, as well as to render the wilderness, vastness, and obscurity of the sublime objects they described'.<sup>96</sup> Despite the roughness of the scene, Mignan was impressed by the 'rugged grandeur' of the 'stupendous' mountains of Muscat. In this context, Samuel Trifilo concludes that 'the bleak mountains peaks' of the Alps appealed also to British travellers to Chile in the beginning of the nineteenth century who were astonished by their 'grandeur and beauty'.<sup>97</sup> Mignan also writes about the weather of Muscat. Having spent the entire month of August in the city, he asserts that 'it is the hottest inhabited place in the whole world' because his thermometer swung between 95° and 120° during the day, and at night the 'dew was as subtle and venomous as the cobra's sting'.<sup>98</sup>

Mignan was impressed by the people's religious tolerance and found them, though strict in practicing religion, 'not bigoted nor intolerant', noticing that they could 'hospitably' share their food with non-Moslems.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, he remarks on their treatment of slaves, asserting, in agreement with the previous travellers, that the kindness with which the slaves were treated in Oman was 'quite proverbial, and [spoke] much in favour of the character of the Arabians, who [were] the kindest and most considerate of masters'. He not only asserts that slaves were well treated, but also states

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<sup>96</sup> Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, pp. 308-309.

<sup>97</sup> S. Samuel Trifilo 'Early Nineteenth-Century British Travelers in Chile: Impressions of Santiago and Valparaiso' *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, 11, no. 3 (1969), 391-424 (p. 397).

<sup>98</sup> Mignan, *A Winter Journey*, II, p. 245.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

that his travels in Arabia convinced him that a slave might be happier and 'more fortunate' than the peasantry of Europe.<sup>100</sup>

In Mignan's account, also, we find an early physical picture of the natives of Muscat:

The natives, although a slender-looking race, have a development of sinew and muscle that cannot be surpassed. Corpulence is unknown amongst them, and old age is much emaciated. They dress very plainly; the male costume consists of a long white or blue shift, buttoned at the throat, leathern sandals, the keffiah, or headkerchief, and pair of shulwars. Very little attention is paid to the cultivation of the beard or moustaches, which are invariably short and scanty, and the head is kept closely shorn. The wardrobe of the women consists of the chemise, the kerchief for the head, and a dark mask over the nose. In contradistinction to the men, they cherish the growth of their coal-black hair, and fasten it up behind the head.<sup>101</sup>

This picture, however, might be intended to refer to the Arabs of Muscat; Mignan tells us that the population of the city was around ten thousand, and that some of the people were Hindus from Bombay and Guzerat, who settled there as merchants and were 'treated with great tolerance'.<sup>102</sup>

Mignan came back to Oman in 1821, as a lieutenant under Sir Lionel Smith, for a campaign against Beni Abu Ali in retaliation for the defeat of British forces in the same year. He found the Arabs more firm and brave than British troops: 'All who witnessed this extraordinary attack, declared that more determined bravery was never displayed by troops of any nation'.<sup>103</sup> In 1825, Mignan paid a third visit to Muscat when his wife was invited to visit the 'Imam's harem'. How the Romantic travellers were concerned with the splendour of the East can be shown by two pictures that Mignan provides in this account, though they are narrated by Mrs. Mignan, his wife, because

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 240-42.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 267-268.



men were not permitted to get into the *harem*. The first picture relates to the Sultan's wife, whom Mrs. Mignan describes in these words:

'Son altesse' was *not* good looking; decidedly the plainest I could see. But who on such an occasion could do more than take a very hasty glance in search of personal beauty, when there was so great a feast for the eyes in the magnificent ornaments of her person? Lacks of rupees would not have purchased half that she wore. One emerald, forming the centre of a necklace composed of emeralds, rubies, and diamonds, was larger than a pigeon's egg. Her feet and ankles were so completely obscured by massive jewelled ornaments, that they needed no other covering. Her arms also, to above the elbow, where a tight sleeve met a tighter body, were encased within a richly embroidered gold kinkob, while a train of dark crimson satin, likewise embroidered in gold, reposed upon the ground. She wore a petticoat of purple satin, in the same style of rich embroidery; and, to complete the *tout ensemble*, a valuable Cachmere shawl crossed her shoulders, and rested on her lap. Over her eyes (all the females present had it also) she wore a frightful thing, which resembled a pair of broad-rimmed spectacles, but made of some kind of stiff cloth, richly worked and spangled with gold.<sup>104</sup>

Another picture given by Mrs. Mignan depicts a room of the Sultan's palace:

One of the rooms into which I was taken struck me much, from its extremely rich appearance, having several handsome chandeliers, and alternately windows of stained and pier glass, from the ceiling to the floor, no wainscot being seen, except in one corner of the apartment, where stood a bed. The divan around the room was raised about three inches, covered with the finest Persian carpeting, which closely resembled, both in texture and pattern, the stuff of which the Cachmere shawl is made. A double row of cushions stood there; those next the wall being of the Indian kinkob, whilst the front row were composed of white satin embroidered in gold, with fringes and-tassels of the same.<sup>105</sup>

Marilyn Butler argues that from the mid-seventeenth century, French culture made the Arab world of the Middle East stylish for other Europeans. First, a group of 'amused and amusing travellers familiarized the Western public with visions of wealth and luxury: palaces, gardens, veiled maidens, and iced sherbet typified Eastern court life'. Then, Butler maintains, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Frenchman Antoine Galland translated an anthology of stories he called the *Arabian Night's Entertainment*,

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<sup>104</sup> Mignan, *A Winter Journey*, I, pp. 65-66.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

which later appeared in English.<sup>106</sup> It was the inspiration of the *Arabian Nights*, therefore, that imbued some of the Western travel writing on the East with exoticism, most particularly writing about the Oriental harem. Within this context, we can understand the tendency of the Mignans to describe, deliberately, the richness and luxury of the Sultan's harem, though they believe that 'Son altesse' was *not* good looking'. It was the example of the style and wit of *Arabian Nights*, also, that led Mignan to tell his readers that the Sultan of Muscat, with an indication to his powerful sexuality, had 'amongst his four hundred ladies some of every clime and country'.<sup>107</sup> Although it is true that Oriental exoticism had a negative implication of the 'irrational, uncivilized', as Smith points out, I would suggest that Mignan's text does not reveal such a representation.<sup>108</sup> It expresses, rather, the idea of magnificence and fascination, on the grounds that Sayyid Said bin Sultan, the 'Imaum of Muscat', was perceived by the Europeans as a civilised Eastern ruler. Mignan himself speaks of his manners positively, insisting that Sayyid Said 'possesse[d] the "suaviter in modo" in a superlative degree' and 'present[ed], in every way, such a contrast to all Asiatic rulers, that he [was] decidedly the greatest "lion" in the east'.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, it was in 1826 that an English woman resident on the Persian Gulf, T. O. Thompson, visited Sayyid Said and described him as 'the only Asiatic I ever saw, who gave me the idea of what is conveyed by the English term gentleman'.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Marilyn Butler, 'Orientalism', in *The Penguin History of Literature: The Romantic Period*, ed. by David B. Pirie (London: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 395-447 (pp.395-396).

<sup>107</sup> Mignan, *A Winter Journey*, I, p. 63.

<sup>108</sup> Sidoni Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.9.

<sup>109</sup> Mignan, *A Winter Journey*, II, pp. 235-236.

<sup>110</sup> T. P. Thompson, 'Arabs and Persians', *Westminster Review*, 5, (1826), 202-248 (p. 206).



James Baillie Fraser, the Scottish traveller and author, stopped at Muscat in 1821 while he was journeying to Khorasn.<sup>111</sup> Along with Johnson and Lumsden, Fraser depicted Muscat as a gloomy place. When he saw the town at first, it reminded him of a 'very wretched Indian town'. Besides, he considered the climate of Oman, and particularly of Muscat, as 'very unfavourable', especially to the 'European constitution'; no one, he claims, resided there for long time without suffering from fever because of the high temperature and the 'suffocating heat of the nights'.<sup>112</sup> Due to such an unhealthy climate, Fraser was informed by the Sultan of Muscat, cholera had wiped out at least ten thousand of the natives.<sup>113</sup> Notwithstanding this bleak image, Fraser was fond of the variety of Muscat's fish: 'I know of no place equal to Muscat for the abundance and excellence of its fish'. He also admired its commerce, considering the town a 'great entreport for warehousing and exchanging the produce of many nations'.<sup>114</sup>

Similarly, Fraser visited Hormuz and found it 'very destructible relics of an ancient eastern city, chiefly resolved into heaps of rubbish'. He argues that the 'wealth and splendour of Hormuz have been infinitely overrated', and that the magnificent descriptions of some travellers were not accurate. Fraser believes that picture of the

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<sup>111</sup>James Baillie Fraser (1783-1856) spent his early life in the West Indies and India. In 1815, he explored the Himalayas, and then was sent to Persia on a diplomatic mission, which enabled him to make extensive journeys in the Middle East and Asia Minor. Fraser wrote several travel books and novels about the East, including: *Journal of a Tour Through Part of the Snowy Range of the Himala Mountains, and to the Sources of the Rivers Jumna and Ganges* (London: Rodwell, 1820), *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan in the Years 1821 and 1822 Including Some Account of the Countries to the North East of Persia* (London: Longman, 1825), *The Kuzzilbash: A Tale of Khorasan*, 3 vols (London: H. Colburn, 1828), *The Highland Smugglers*, 3 vols (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1832), *The Khan's Tale* (London: Simms, 1833), *An Historical and Descriptive Account of Persia: From the Earliest Ages to the Present Time: With a Detailed View of Its Resources, Government, Population, Natural History, and the Character of Its Inhabitants, Particularly of the Wandering Tribes; Including a Description of Afghanistan and Beloochistan* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1834), *Allee Neemroo, the Buchtiaree Adventurer: A Tale of Louristan*, 3 vols (London: [n.pub], 1842), *Mesopotamia and Assyria: From the Earliest Ages to the Present Time; With Illustrations of Their Natural History* (London: Simpkin, 1842), *The Dark Falcon: A Tale of the Attruck*, 4 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1844). About Fraser, see J. M. Rigg, 'Fraser, James Baillie', in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by Leslie Stephen, (London: Smith, 1889), XX, pp.211-212.

<sup>112</sup> Fraser, *Narrative of a Journey*, pp. 8-10.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p. 8 and p. 16.

East, in general, as a place of wealth needed to be rethought: 'Splendour and magnificence when spoken of in the East, refer almost solely to the person and immediate attendants of the Sovereign. The people may be, and often are, poorer in an inverse ratio to the wealth which that sovereign displays'.<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, Fraser at the end of his visit to this ancient Eastern city, insisted on saying farewell with these romantic words: 'It was lovely, a magnificent night. The scene, the time, the place, the costume of our attendants, could not fail to bring powerfully before us the descriptions of one of our sweetest poets, in one of his most touching compositions'.<sup>116</sup>

In 1823, Captain William Owen sailed to Muscat on board the *Leven* to obtain permission from Sayyid Said, the Sultan of Muscat, to survey the coastline of Omani possessions in East Africa. His account of Oman is included in his *Narrative of Voyages*, which was first published in 1833.<sup>117</sup> He inaugurated his account with a

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, pp. 48-49. Hormuz, or Ormuz as it is spelt in English literature, occupies a strategic spot in the north of Oman. It used to be a very rich kingdom; it was even described as a paragon of splendour in English literature. This is an example from seventeenth-century English poetry:

'Ormuz, the *Persian Eden*, now once more  
May hope to be a well-frequented Shore;  
Now of fresh Streams it shall have large Supplies,  
And rich as those that water'd *Paradise*'.

See Edmund Arwaker, 'A Poem on the Excellent and Useful Invention of Making Sea-Water Fresh'. *Fons Perennis* (London: Henry Bonwick, 1686).

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>117</sup> William Fitzwilliam Owen (1774-1857) was an English vice-admiral and sailor. In 1806, he explored the Maldive Islands, and discovered the Sea Flower Channel between Si-biru and Si-pora on the west coast of Sumatra. In 1821, he was appointed to the *Leven* and sent to survey the coast of Africa. He is believed to have written one book, *Narrative of Voyages to Explore the Shores of Africa, Arabia, and Madagascar* (London: Richard Bentley, 1833). However, this book looks like a biography of Captain Owen, rather than an autobiography. In the chapters about Oman, I found at least three sentences that suggest that the writer was not Owen but somebody else: 'Captain Owen upon this gave him [the Sultan of Muscat] an Arabic copy of the Scriptures' (p. 342); 'It was the Captain's intention to trace the coast minutely from Muscat as far as Dafoor' (p. 344); and 'Off Cape Morbat, the wind came round from the westward, when Captain Owen was taken extremely ill from the stroke of the blot' (p. 349). In addition, Brian Marshall has noticed that Owen's book is badly edited by Heaton Bowestead Robinson as it is confusing and it is hard to know whether the words are those of Owen or Thomas Boteler, who was second lieutenant on the *Leven*. However, Marshall asserts that Boteler never visited Oman. See Brian Marshall, "European Travellers in Oman and South East Arabia 1792-1950: A Biobibliographical Study", *New Arabian Studies*, 2 (1994): pp. 1-57 (p. 11).



melancholic image: 'Muscat must be the filthiest town in the world'.<sup>118</sup> Nor did Owen stop at this point:

The Arab is beyond a doubt the dirtiest of the human species. It was not without good reason that the lawgiver of that people enjoined numerous daily ablutions as a religious dogma, the fulfilment of which, he told them, was as necessary to salvation as prayer; but this, like most dogmas in their own and other religions, is now become a matter of mere form, affording no security against their habitual uncleanness.<sup>119</sup>

We can allow the possibility that any place at that time, anywhere in the world, was dirty for one reason or another, but we cannot understand the charge that Arabs as a race were 'the dirtiest of the human species' other than implying racism. Prevalent stereotypes of the time fixed such generalizations in some Western minds. Homi Bhabha puts it clearly: 'stereotype impedes the circulation and articulation of the signifier of 'race' as anything other than its fixity as racism. We already know that blacks are licentious, Asiatics duplicitous'.<sup>120</sup> What attests to Owen's racist attitude, in the above statement, is his subjoining, ironically, the Arabs' 'habitual uncleanness' to the Islamic dogma of ablution, as if he wanted to say that the Arabs were singled out, among all human beings, because they were congenitally dirty. Needless to say that such an idea speaks of racial prejudice. Owen was aware that Islam was not limited to Arabs, for he travelled widely and saw Muslims from diverse nations and backgrounds. Moreover, he knew that baptism in Christianity, analogically to ablution in Islam, was enacted by Christians, including Europeans, for a purificatory purpose.

However, as I have suggested in the first chapter, there are different voices within British travel writing on Oman, even within a given work. Captain Owen provides another picture about the Arabs of Muscat regarding their religious tolerance.

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<sup>118</sup> Owen, *Narrative of Voyages*, p. 336.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, p. 338.

Two incidents that Owen witnessed in Muscat were enough to convince him that 'bigotry is not amongst the vices of Muscat'. The first incident took place when Captain Owen presented the sultan of Muscat, Sayyid Said, with an Arabic copy of the Scriptures, with which the sultan 'appeared much gratified' because the Bible is acknowledged by the Koran to be a holy book. The second occurred when Sayyid Said paid a sudden visit to Captain Owen and his crew on the *Leven*. The crew's preparation for this visit, as Owen says, was funny because, as there were many pigs on board, the crew decided to put them into the boats so that they might not insult the Sultan by their 'profane appearance'. The noise they made during this operation was enough to alarm every Muslim in Muscat 'as if animated with the vulgar desire of offending the religious prejudices of the natives', but the scene, instead, provided much amusement to both the Muslims and the British.<sup>121</sup>

In 1824, Captain George Keppel visited Muscat while coming back from India to England.<sup>122</sup> In his visit to the palace of Sayyid Said, the Sultan of Muscat, Keppel, along with Malcolm, paid attention to the patriarchy of this sultan. He writes:

The patriarchal simplicity of the Arab character is strongly marked in every thing connected with this court. In the daily divan held by the Imaum, every one seats himself

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<sup>120</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', in *Literature Politics & Theory*, ed. by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen and Diana Loxley (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 162-163.

<sup>121</sup> Owen, *Narrative of Voyages*, p. 342.

<sup>122</sup> George Thomas Keppel (1799-1891) was sixth Earl of Albemarle. He served in India as aide-de-camp to the governor-general, but he resigned in 1823 to return home overland. During this voyage, he visited Iraq, Persia, Oman, thence sailed to England through Baku, Astrakan, Moscow, and Petersburg. In 1829, he joined the English fleet in the Turkish waters visiting Constantinople, Adrianople and the Balkans. Keppel published his journeys and experience in two travelogues and an autobiography: *Personal Narrative of a Journey From India to England, by Bussorah, Bagdad, the Ruins of Babylon, Curdistan, the Court of Persia, the Western Shore of the Caspian Sea, Astrakhan, Nishney Novogorod, Moscow, and St. Petersburg, in the Year 1824*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1827), *Narrative of a Journey Across the Balcan by the Two Passes of Selimno and Pravadi: Also of a Visit to Azani and Other Newly Discovered Ruins in Asia Minor, in the Years 1829-30*, 2 vols (London: H. Colburn & R. Bentley, 1831), *Fifty Years of My Life*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1876). For more details, see H. Manners Chichester, 'Keppel, George Thomas', in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by Sidney Lee (London: Smith, 1892), XXXI, pp.43-44.



without any reference to priority. Even beggars can demand this audience, and may be sure of having a patient hearing given to their complaints.<sup>123</sup>

Such as observation might have particular significance in Western travel writing at that time. Describing the relations between the ruler and his subjects in Oman as simple and 'patriarchal', upsets the notion of 'Oriental despotism' that prevailed in many Western discourses on the East.<sup>124</sup> Daniel J. Vitkus in his discussion of Othello's 'tyrannical lordship' in Shakespeare's work, argues that the character of Othello contributed to a stereotype developed by Western writers, in which the Islamic prince was commonly symbolized in early modern texts as a despot who ruled by 'will and appetite, committing rash acts in the name of honour or false religion'. This type of 'stock character', he maintains, has a long history, going back to the Moorish villains of the romance tradition and the stage tyrants of medieval drama.<sup>125</sup> Keppel's observation could be read from another angle; that is, it could imply a cultural self-critique in which he criticises British despotism. Henry Weisser, having studied the British working class movements from 1815 to 1848, suggests that the British system, under 'forms of law' and 'constitutionalism', was far more oppressive and tyrannical for the poor and unrepresented sections of the British society than Turkish despotism was for its subjects. It was categorically asserted, Weisser claims, that the Turkish Sultan possessed no power whereby he could compel his subjects to work 'as the English slaves work'.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Keppel, *Personal Narrative of a Journey from India to England*, I, p. 15.

<sup>124</sup> The term 'patriarchal', here, does not convey the negative meaning, raised by 'Feminist criticism', when the government becomes 'male-centered and controlled' to subordinate women to men. (see: Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p. 89). Rather, it was meant to be vis-à-vis of despotism, as we have seen Malcolm described Sayyid Said as 'more of a patriarchal than despotic character'.

<sup>125</sup> Daniel J. Vitkus, 'Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor' *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 48, no. 2 (1997), 145-176 (p.171).

<sup>126</sup> Henry Weisser, *British Working Class Movements and Europe 1815-48* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), pp. 82- 91.

Many travellers noted the tolerance of the natives of Muscat, but Keppel, like Heude, attributes this quality to their Islamic sect, Ibadism. Keppel speaks briefly of the historical backgrounds of the three Islamic sects, Sunnism, Shiasim and Ibadism. Both the former sects, he asserts, have a kind of 'veneration' for the descendents of the Prophet, while the latter maintains that all Muslims are entitled to positions of leadership. Therefore, he characterises the Muslims of Oman as follows: 'They worship no saints; and have neither convents nor dervishes. They have a great regard for justice; and a universal toleration for other religions'.<sup>127</sup> However, Keppel depicts Muscat and its people negatively, in terms of health and cleanliness. Like Owen and other travellers, he found the streets of Muscat 'extremely filthy' and narrow. Of the people he writes: 'the natives are very squalid in appearance, there are scarcely any who have not sore eyes, and one-tenth of the population is blind of an eye'.<sup>128</sup>

Between 1820 and 1829, the Bombay Marine undertook its surveys in the Persian Gulf. Among the officers of the Bombay Marine was Lieutenant Whitelock, who published an account about the Arabs of the Oman Coast in the northwest of the country. The significance of this account is that it provides us with British travellers' attitudes toward another part of the country. Whitelock provides descriptive sketches regarding the natives' dress, houses, diet, customs, manners, conventions and trade. Throughout his account, he reveals his attitudes toward the inhabitants, showing sometimes his impression of their hospitality, bravery and kindness, though also criticising 'their piracy and plunder'. In fact, Whitelock came to the area bearing in mind a stereotypical image of the inhabitants of this part of Oman as 'pirates', as we can see from the title of his account, in which he claims that the area from Ras-elkhaimah to

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<sup>127</sup> Keppel, *Personal Narrative*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.



Abu Dhabi was 'generally called the Pirate Coast'. Moreover, he declares that the people of each town of this coast were 'familiar enough with strife and plunder'.<sup>129</sup>

It takes some explanation to understand why British travellers such as Whitelock insisted on stereotyping the people of this area as 'pirates'. Officials of the East India Company had been able to circulate the idea that, towards the end of the eighteenth century and during the first two decades of the nineteenth, the Arabs of the Gulf, mainly the Al-Qasimi, were implicated in great acts of piracy against international trade, not only in the Gulf, but also in the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Indeed, the Company's Government of Bombay, as Sultan Al-Qasimi argues, found out that there was a 'real opposition' to their policy in the Gulf, and in order to suppress any opposing power from the coast of Oman, the British did their utmost to mobilise against their enemies. Therefore, an intensive campaign was launched by Company officials to picture the Qawasim and other tribes along the Coast as pirates whose activities caused a threat to all naval activities in the Indian Ocean and neighbouring waters. 'Any misfortune that happened to any ship in the area was capriciously attributed to the 'Joasmee pirates'. In this way the strategy of the 'Big Lie' was contrived; almost overnight the term 'Joasmees' became synonymous with 'pirates', and even the home of the Qawasim became the 'Pirate Coast'.<sup>130</sup>

Moreover, if there were some attacks on ships made by the Arabs of the Coast of Oman, we should realize that there was continuous war among the rival powers in the Gulf— Arabs, Dutch, Portuguese, French and British. Thus, if the Arabs captured any of their rivals' ships at that time, it could have been a legitimate act of war. Furthermore, B. J. Slot argues that there were cases of European piracy. One

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<sup>129</sup>H. H Whitelock, "An Account of Arabs Who Inhabit the Coast Between Ras-elkheimah and Abothubee in the Gulf of Persia, Generally Called the Pirate Coast", *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society*, 1 (1836-1838), 32-54 (p.32).

particularly horrible case, he maintains, was documented in the diary of the Dutch establishment in Surat. The ship of an English intruder was wrecked off Muscat, and some of its crew came on board a boat belonging to an Arab merchant. These Englishmen offered the crew of the Arab ship alcohol, and when these sailors were drunk, they killed most of them, saving two women. They cruised to Onore, and off the coast they raped and murdered the women and sold the ship in Onore.<sup>131</sup>

Accordingly, although there were reciprocal attacks among British, Arabs, Portuguese and Dutch in the Gulf, it seems that the East India Company overemphasised the subject of piracy in the Coast of Oman as warfare propaganda. The bulk of the British travellers and officials who visited the Gulf contributed to this political campaign by charging the people, who were against the foreign intervention in their home, with piracy. Philip Francis, a member of Parliament at the time, declared in his discussion of this Company's policy that, 'whenever the Governor-General and Council were disposed to make war upon their neighbours, they could at all times fabricate a case to suit their purpose'.<sup>132</sup> British travellers who made the charge of piracy sought to circulate the idea that the Arabs of the Gulf were rescued from these evil activities by the compassionate efforts of the British East India Company, whose interference in the Gulf was only for the purpose of protecting law and peace. In this context, Aqil Kazim argues that British colonialism at the outset of the nineteenth century changed to the discourse of championing humanitarianism, and the worldwide spread of development and civilization. This discourse, he maintains, not only justified British colonial interference in the Gulf, but also misled British public opinion into

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<sup>130</sup> Al-Qasimi, *The Myth of Arab Piracy*, p. xv. For other sources about the subject see: Charles Belgrave, *The Pirate Coast* (Beirut: Librarie Du Liban, 1960, 1972), and H. Moyse-Bartlett, *The Pirates of Trucial Oman* (London: Macdonald, 1966).

<sup>131</sup> Slot, *The Arabs of the Gulf*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>132</sup> C. H. Philips, *The East India Company 1784-1834* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), pp. 32-33. See also Al-Qasimi, *The Myth of Arab Piracy*, p. xv.



sustaining it, particularly in the course of its focus on the claimed British mission of 'eradicating piracy, slavery, and local warfare, and of ensuring stability and order'.<sup>133</sup>

Going back to Whitelock's narrative, the imperial rhetoric is manifest in his dealing with the subject of 'piracy'. Indeed, he approaches the matter as a representative of a colonial power that interfered in the Gulf to protect it from 'disorder', 'plunder' and 'strife'. 'I do not think the Gulf will be ever again in a state of general disorder: if it is, we shall have ourselves to blame', he declares after describing the British military campaigns against the Qawasim.<sup>134</sup> Elsewhere, he attempts to justify British intervention in the area and unveils the political mission of the Bombay Marine's survey: 'plunder and strife is therefore not uncommon, and it requires much vigilance on our part to suppress it, and to do this effectually, it is absolutely necessary to have two vessels on the pearl bank for the purpose'.<sup>135</sup> The voice of this imperial rhetoric culminated in Whitelock dubbing all the inhabitants of the Oman Coast as pirates, and asserting that they feared non but the British: 'They are professed pirates, and it is only a fear of the English that checks them'.<sup>136</sup>

Beside the picture of piracy, Whitelock provides some descriptions of the Arabs of 'Oman Coast' in terms of their physiognomy, life and religion. He describes them as being generally 'strong, muscular, thick set men', and:

In early youth they are [...], slender looking men active withal, but considerably under our standard in stature; from thirty to forty they are a powerful thick-necked race, with a development of sinew and muscle that I never saw surpassed. But in old age, generally

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<sup>133</sup> Aqil Kazim, *The United Arab Emirates A.D. 600 to the Present: A Socio-Discursive Transformation in the Arabian Gulf* (Dubai: Gulf Book Centre, 2000), p. 140.

<sup>134</sup> Whitelock, "An Account of Arabs who inhabit the coast between Ras-elkheimah and Abothubee in the Gulf of Persia, generally called the Pirate Coast", pp. 34-35.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, p. 46.

much attenuated; it is seldom that you meet with a sleek, corpulent person amongst them at any age.<sup>137</sup>

This positive image of their external appearance, however, was contrasted with a picture of their miserable lives. He found their houses consisting in huts 'without comfort', deemed their diet 'simple enough' and said some diseases such as fever and 'ophthalmia' were prevalent amongst them. Also, he said they were 'very dirty in their persons, and rarely wash[ed] their clothes'. His description of their children might sum up their wretched situation:

The children are neglected in point of cleanliness, and it is common to see them thus early affected with ophthalmia, which I think partly arises from the flies being allowed to lodge round their eyelids; they appear to become quite insensible to the annoyance, and the insects remain in clusters on their dirty faces undisturbed.<sup>138</sup>

Regarding their religion, Whitelock provides a different picture from that of previous travellers regarding tolerance of the natives of Muscat. He writes:

The inhabitants being Wahabees, are generally very strict in the outward observances of religion, never omitting, under any circumstances, their ablutions and prayers at the proper hour. Perhaps they may be considered bigoted and intolerant, and they certainly have no regard for any people not professing the Muslaman faith.<sup>139</sup>

Nevertheless, both the natives of Muscat and the people of this coast shared British travellers' attitudes toward their treatment of slaves. Whitelock praises the courtesy they showed in the treatment of their slaves: 'Their kindness to them speaks much in favour of the Arab character, and shows their proper and manly feelings towards mankind in general', he says.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, pp. 37-38.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p. 40.



#### 4. Victorian Travellers

Major Thomas Skinner visited Muscat in June 1833.<sup>141</sup> He was so impressed by the tranquillity of the Omani shores that he portrayed them poetically: 'The Peri might on such a day warble her lamentation for Araby's daughter without a ripple on the shores of Oman to disturb her!'<sup>142</sup> When Skinner reached Muscat, however, he was annoyed by the high temperature of the city, which he deemed 'the hottest place on earth'; he found the Arabs dubbing it as 'El Jehannum' or Hell.<sup>143</sup> Skinner described the heat of Muscat, claiming that because of it he could not explore the town; he preferred to stay in a small bazaar with some Banians, where he thought that he 'should have melted away'. For him, this heat was due to the location of Muscat; the city was situated in the midst of rocks that kept out all wind and, therefore, 'when the sun has set, they glow like heated ovens'.<sup>144</sup> For this reason, Skinner neither explored Muscat nor met with the natives. He preferred to return to his ship. He wrote: 'I looked in vain for something green to relieve my eyes, all was black and withered; and I was too happy to return to the ship again, perfectly ready to believe that Muscat deserves its infernal appellation'.<sup>145</sup>

Between 1833 and 1846, the English brig *Palinurus* carried out many surveys in the south and southeast of the Arabian coast. Most of the surveyors on the *Palinurus*

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

<sup>141</sup> Thomas Skinner (1800-1843) was an English soldier and author. In 1826, he explored the little-known mountainous districts of India and the Himalayas. In 1833, he made an expedition from England to India visiting Egypt, Syria, Iraq, the Gulf and Oman. Skinner wrote about his journeys in two works: *Excursions in India: Including a Walk Over the Himalaya Mountains, to the Sources of the Jumna and the Ganges*, 2 vols (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1832), and *Adventures During a Journey Overland to India, by Way of Egypt, Syria, and the Holy Land*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1836). For more details, see E. Irving Carlyle, 'Skinner, Thomas', in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by Sidney Lee (London: Smith, 1897), LII, p. 349.

<sup>142</sup> Skinner, *Adventures*, II, p. 284.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p. 285.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, p. 287.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, pp. 287-288.

published their accounts in the *Journal of the Bombay Geographical Society*, and the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*.<sup>146</sup> Haines, Hulton, Cruttenden, Carter and Saunders were among them. The significance of their travel accounts is that they provide early pictures of the inhabitants of the south and southeast areas of Oman from Dhofar to Ras Al Had.

One of the earliest surveyors on the *Palinurus* was Captain Stafford Haines, who sailed in 1834 and reached Morbat in the south of Oman. In his survey, Haines charted the entire south Arabian coast from Dhofar to Sur. He found the soil of the province of Dhofar 'abundantly luxuriant', though he believed that the people were, in general, 'extremely indolent'.<sup>147</sup> Regarding the general outward appearance of the males in Dhofar, Haines provides this portrait:

The males in person are light and active, of middling stature, with well-knit limbs. They are crafty, extremely hardy and bold. Their dress is a turban with a blue ground and white stripes, and a coarse dark blue waistband with loose folds in front, one end passing over the shoulder and back, and the other hanging down the right side. Their skins are deeply dyed with the indigo from their clothes, which are seldom, if ever washed.<sup>148</sup>

However, Haines distinguishes between the mountain inhabitants and the dwellers of the plain in Dhofar. Of the former, the Qara tribe, he writes: 'These hospitable mountaineers are handsome, well-made, active men', and even their women were 'handsome and fairer than seen on the coast'. As evidence for their generosity, Haines relates the story of dispatching to them Mr. Smith who traversed, under the name of Ahmed, the lofty mountain range of Sumhan, where the natives treated him courteously. Haines writes:

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<sup>146</sup> See the bibliography for full details about these accounts.

<sup>147</sup> Stafford Bettsworth Haines, 'Memoir of the South and East Coast of Arabia' *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 15 (1845), 104-160 (p.117).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p. 112.



He was everywhere hospitably entertained by them, and they would not even permit him to drink water from the numerous clear mountain-streams that were meandering in every direction. "No," they said, "do not return, Ahmed, and say we gave you water while our children drank no thing but milk." In every instance they gave him the warmest place at the fire, and invariably appointed some one to attend to his wants. They even extended their generosity so far as to offer him a wife and some sheep, if he would only stay and reside among them.<sup>149</sup>

This picture, however, is contrasted with a different description of the people of the plains, whom Haines describes as 'timorous, indolent, and much addicted to the use of tobacco'.<sup>150</sup>

From Dhofar, Haines navigated along the southern coast of Oman up to Kuria Muria islands, providing topographical descriptions of the whole coast. In Hullanyyat, the only inhabited island of the Kuria Muria group, he found the people very poor but 'inoffensive and civil'.<sup>151</sup> In general, he found all the natives on this coastal area very poor. At Bunder Nus, for instance, he found the population 'scanty' and saw some 'half starved wretches', who called themselves 'servants of the Nebi Saleh ibn Hude', and lived on the possible assistance of travellers.<sup>152</sup> Also, he saw at Hasek some people who were 'entirely without clothing, living exclusively on fish, and wretched in the extreme', and in Kuria Muria islands he found 'some graves, and some skeletons in such positions as if the poor creatures had perished from starvation'.<sup>153</sup> Indeed, Haines's memoir of these indigenous people is full of repetitive images of misery, and references to 'poor islanders', 'poor wretches' and 'miserable fishermen'.

Another surveyor on the *Palinurus* was Charles Cruttenden, who, while the ship was off the coast of Dhofar, travelled overland on foot from Morbat to Dhareez

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, pp. 117-118.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, p. 120.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, p. 135.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, p.129.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, p. 130, and p. 134.

accompanied by two Bedouins from the Kara tribe as guides. Having left Morbat, after describing its trade and cultivation, he proceeded on his journey to Thagha where its chieftain received him kindly: 'nothing could exceed the kindness of my reception. His own bed was brought to me [and] I found dinner ready, consisting of boiled mutton with honey and rice'.<sup>154</sup> Cruttenden received the same kindness when he reached his last destination, Dhareez, where he was impressed by the natives' hospitality:

I took leave of my kind host Ahmed Ali Murdoof, and returned on board much pleased with my excursion and agreeably surprised at the kind I had experienced from people, who bear the worst name on the southern coast of Arabia.<sup>155</sup>

This experience with the natives of Dhofar, therefore, not only enabled Cruttenden to mend their bad image of bearing the 'worst name', but also led him to advise his fellow-travellers that 'the danger of travelling in this interesting country appears to be a mere *bugbear*'.<sup>156</sup>

John Henry Carter, the assistant surgeon on the *Palinurus*, visited Dhofar after Cruttenden. His account of the ruins of 'El Balad' provides archaeological descriptions of this ancient city. Having investigated these ruins, Carter recognised them as the remains of 'highly civilized people'.<sup>157</sup> Also, he found an inscription, which bore some Arabic words, 'sculptured in a highly involved and elaborately ornamented style of writing'.<sup>158</sup> However, like previous British surveyors who inferiorised the natives of Dhofar, considering them as 'indolent', Carter believes that this city could not have been built by the Dhofaris. He writes:

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<sup>154</sup> Charles. J. Cruttenden, 'Journal of an Excursion from Morbat to Dyreez, the Principal Town of Dofar' *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society*, 1 (138-138), 184-188 (pp. 185-186).

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, p. 187.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>157</sup> Henry John Carter, 'The Ruins of El Balad' *Journal of the Geographical Society*, 16 (1846), 187-199, (p. 188).

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, p. 194.



They were evidently not the barbarous inhabitants of the southern coast of Arabia. The taste which is displayed in the elegance of the designs in the few specimens of sculpture that remain must have been brought from another country and those who imported it were evidently from another country also, and one more civilized than the inhabitants of the south-eastern coast of Arabia could ever boast of.<sup>159</sup>

The same notion that the inhabitants of Dhofar were indolent appears in the writing of J. P. Saunders, who came with the *Palinurus* in 1844 to survey the south-eastern coast of Oman. He writes:

The inhabitants of Dhafar are a weak, indolent race, terrified to the last degree of the Beni Gharrah, who, taking advantage of their timidity, oppress them very much, and hesitate not, when opposition is dared to be shown, to use sword or jambier to enforce their demands.<sup>160</sup>

However, the bravery of the 'Beni Gharrah' is viewed elsewhere by Saunders as 'bad character' because, he says, they 'hesitate not to commit any crime' and they were known for 'breach of faith'.<sup>161</sup>

Robert Binning stopped at Muscat in October 1850 during his travels to Persia and Ceylon.<sup>162</sup> Regarding Muscat, Binning's observations did not move much beyond the image depicted by previous travellers in the Romantic period. Like Malcolm and others, he noticed the patriarchal system of Sayyid Said bin Sultan, whom he found beloved by his people and respected by all others: 'By all accounts, he must be

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

<sup>160</sup> J. P. Saunders, 'A short Memoir of the Proceedings of the Honourable Company's Surveying Brig "Palinurus" during her Late Examination of the Coast between Ras Morbat and Ras Seger, and between Ras Fartak and the Ruins of Mesinah' *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 16 (1846), 169-186 (p. 175).

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>162</sup> Robert Blair Munro Binning (1814-1891) was an enthusiastic Arabist and traveller. He served as an administrator in the East India Company Service in Madras. From 1845-1852, he journeyed extensively in the Middle East, visiting Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Persia, Ceylon, the Gulf and Oman. He contributed to Orientalism by assembling a collection of about 140 Oriental manuscripts, which he presented to two Edinburgh institutions in 1877. His travels are told in his work: *A Journal of Two Years' Travel in Persia, Ceylon, Etc*, 2 vols (London: Wm. H. Allen, 1857).

something very unlike most other Asiatic despots'.<sup>163</sup> Also, he commented on the climate of Muscat, considering the city, like most of the travellers, 'one of the hottest places the sun shines on', and the streets as 'narrow and dirty'.<sup>164</sup> The tolerance and kindness of the natives is also remarked on by Binning. He found the British agent in Muscat, who was a Jew, treated with courtesy and called by the inhabitants 'Master'. He maintains: 'I was much surprised to witness the great respect shown him by the Mahomedans of this place; for I had never before seen any son of Islam exhibit the least civility to one of his degraded race'.<sup>165</sup> Similarly, Binning offers his testimony on the slaves' status in Muscat, asserting that they were 'treated with great consideration'. Such humanity to slaves, Binning believes, was demanded by the Prophet Mohammed. However, Binning expresses this in a somewhat biased way:

Kindness to slaves was particularly enjoined by the false Prophet of Mecca. Among other injunctions, Mahommed declared that "whoever shall separate a mother from her child, in disposing of slaves, God will separate him from his friends at the day of judgment"—a human precept, which traffickers in human flesh, in more enlightened lands, would do well to observe.<sup>166</sup>

Although the passage speaks much of Binning's positive impression of the Islamic attitude toward slavery, charging the Prophet Mohammed with being 'false' reveals Binning's religious preconception. William Jones argues that Mohammed was usually depicted in Europe Christian sources as 'the false prophet'.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, p. 123.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, pp. 124, 126.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, pp. 125-126.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, pp. 128-129.

<sup>167</sup> William. R. Jones, 'Perception of Ethnic and Cultural Differences: The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 13, no. 4 (1971), 376-407 (p. 392).



Moreover, Binning was also puzzled by the diversity of Muscat's dwellers. Crowd of different races came on board his steamer, in order to 'inspect the novelty' and 'gratify their curiosity'. This inspired him to write:

A strange motley set they were!— Wild-looking, sunburnt Bedouins, from the interior of the country, with their guns and large daggers which they never think of parting with for a moment, came and started open-mouthed at everything they beheld, apparently scarce believing their own eyes— while sleek ghee-fed Indian banians, in their high turbans and long robes of snow-white muslin, paced slowly about, contemplating every object with an air of philosophic indifference.<sup>168</sup>

The diversity of Muscat's society had been noticed, previously, by Buckingham and Heude. What is novel, here, in Binning's text is the comic style which reveals the 'otherness' of the observer, or traveller, for the observed, or 'travelee'. Expressions such as 'wild-looking', 'sunburnt Bedouins', 'open-mouthed', 'sleek ghee-fed Indian' and 'philosophic indifference' enhance the exoticism of the Easterners within an ironical frame.

Binning discloses that the dialect of Arabic spoken at Muscat was quite different from other Arabic dialects. He could not understand, as he claims, half of a long story related to him by one of the inhabitants. For Binning, however, the reason for this was the ignorance which prevailed among the bulk of the natives. 'Educated men are very rare among them, and the lower orders never read at all', he states. Therefore, he maintains, they could only understand the dialect which they had adapted from their childhood to use.<sup>169</sup> This status of the Arabs of Muscat led Binning to lament:

What a contrast do the Arabs of this day present to their forefathers a thousand years ago! These were then the successors of the Greeks, in science and polite literature; and

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<sup>168</sup> Binning, *A Journal of Two Years' Travel*, pp. 129-130.

<sup>169</sup> It seems that Binning had learnt formal Arabic somewhere in the Arab world before he was in Oman. His interests in Arabic are shown in his work: *A Grammar, With a Selection of Dialogues and Familiar Phrases, and a Short Vocabulary in Modern Arabic* (London: James Madden, 1849).

the depositories of all learning: while Europe was benighted in that long, dark, and barbarous period, that followed the overthrow of the Roman Empire.<sup>170</sup>

A Lieutenant of the Indian Navy and author of several travel books Charles Rathbone Low visited Oman during the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>171</sup> It seems that Low was a polemical traveller who did not like the East and its people. He launches his account of Oman with an attack on Romantic writers who looked to the East as a place of inspiration. Passing through the straits of Hormuz into the Persian Gulf, the traveller, he argues, would reach the shores of lands that for a long time had been the desired 'theme of romancers'. The countries of the East, Low maintains, abounded with 'poetic associations', but Persia and Arabia did, '*par excellence*'. They were the 'favoured abodes of the muses'. In contrast to this Romantic view, Low claims that to any one who had attained any real knowledge of the people dwelling in these countries, 'how grossly untrue do the statements of these "lying romancers" turn out!'<sup>172</sup> Unlike John Milton and Thomas Moore, who immortalized

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<sup>170</sup> Binning, *A Journal of Two Years' Travel*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>171</sup> Charles Rathbone Low (1837-1918) was an English naval officer, historian and author. He was a productive writer interested in travel writing, biographies, poetry and naval literature. Some of his famous works are: *The Adventures of J. Hawsepipe, Master Mariner: A Tale of the Sea and Land* (London:[n.pub], 1868), *Tales of Old Ocean* (London : Hodder & Stoughton, 1869), *The Land of the Sun: Sketches of Travel, with Memoranda, Historical and Geographical, of Places of Interests in the East, Visited during Many Years' Service in Indian Waters* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), *The Letter of Marque and Tales of the Sea and Land* (London, Guildford, 1873), *The Life and Correspondence of Field-Marshal Sir G. Pollock* (London: [n.pub], 1873), *History of the Indian Navy (1613-1863)*, 2 vols (London : R. Bentley, 1877), *Soldiers of the Victorian Age*, 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1880), *Maritime Discovery: a History of Nautical Exploration From the Earliest Times*, 2 vols (London: Newman, 1881), *Cyril Hamilton: His Adventures by Sea and Land* (London: Routledge, 1884), *The Great Battles of the British Army* (London :Routledge, 1885), *Battles of the British Army: Being a Continuous History of Its Services, Its Defeats and Its Victories From the Earliest Times* (London: Routledge, 1890), *Cressy to Tel-El-Kebîr: A Narrative Poem, Descriptive of the Deeds of the British Army* (London: W. Mitchell, 1892), *Britannia's Bulwarks: An Historical Poem, Descriptive of the Deeds of the British Navy* (London : H. Cox, 1895), *The Epic of Olympus: A Narrative Poem Descriptive of the Deeds of the Deities and Heroes of Greek Mythology* (London: Digby, 1897).

Low did not mention exactly the year of his visit to Oman; in his narrative *The Land of the Sun*, however, he stated that he visited Sayyid Said bin Sultan during the last years of his reign, which ended in 1856.

<sup>172</sup> Charles Rathbone Low, *The Land of the Sun: Sketches of Travel, with Memoranda, Historical and Geographical, of Places of Interests in the East, Visited during Many Years' Service in Indian Waters* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), p. 178.



Hormuz in poems such as 'Paradise Lost' and 'The Fire-Worshippers', Low, describing himself as an 'eye witness', offers a different picture of this city. He claims that 'if the abomination of desolation is to be found anywhere, it certainly is apparent in this once world-renowned island'.<sup>173</sup> In fact, Low concludes his vision of Hormuz by asserting that 'it appears to be one of the last spots of the globe which human beings would desire to inhabit'.<sup>174</sup> It was the reputation of Hormuz as a wealthy Oriental city that led Low, finally, to apologize to his readers for providing such an unexpected image: 'I am afraid that I have played "old gooseberry" with preconceived notions of Hormuz and "the parts that thereunto adjacent lie", but truth is great, and will prevail'.<sup>175</sup>

Similarly, Low criticises Thomas Moore and other Romantic writers for their imaginary portrayal of the Gulf, claiming that whenever he read 'Lalla Rookh' he thought of his days passed in that 'dreary Gulf'. He suggests that the poets who proclaimed the Gulf's beauties, from the Persian Hafiz to the English Thomas Moore, 'would render it ground sacred to the muses of poetry and song', but he never could discover what Moore found in the Gulf and its surrounding shores, 'to go into raptures about'.<sup>176</sup> Low sums up his observations on the region as follows:

As I have thus gazed at the desolate desert shore of those dreary, never-to-be-forgotten places, I have rubbed my eyes and turned back to the page before me from the sad reality which blasted my eyesight; I speak the word "blasted" advisedly, and with a literal meaning, for the hot wind would blow in a strong sirocco from the shore, bearing on its wings clouds of impalpable but gritty atoms of the sand, which spreads in arid and seemingly limitless wastes as far as the eye can reach, that is, if the optic organs are in a condition, after a sandstorm, to "reach" anywhere.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid, pp. 180-181.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, p. 184.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, p. 201.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, p. 202.

He concludes this picture of the Gulf and its surroundings proclaiming the value of 'actual travel'; in this he contrasts himself with Moore whom he criticises for never having been in that part of the world. Low compares Moore to a German professor who had never seen a camel, but even so 'evolved out of his inner consciousness' a portrait of the animal. Low describes Muscat as presenting 'a very fine appearance from a distance', but says that when he came to land and wandered about its 'miserable streets', he was shocked by the apparent 'poverty and squalor' of the city.<sup>178</sup>

Low was also vitriolic in criticising the appearance and manners of the people. Consider this passage, for instance:

The Arabs are a race in whom are combined, in due proportion, the vices of lying and cheating, while they are also treacherous friends, and cruel enemies. As to their persons they are filthy in their habits, possessing not the most distant regard to personal cleanliness, while their profligacy is as gross as the Turks, or their neighbours the Persians; they have, in short, but the one redeeming feature of high animal courage.<sup>179</sup>

One might argue that Low, here, means to describe the Bedouins or the Arabs of the desert, whom the Arab townspeople, themselves, might describe not less severely. But he generalises about all the races of Arabs, asserting that it was wrong to think that the Arabs dwelling in the interior of the country were free from the 'vices of their countrymen' in the coastal area.<sup>180</sup> Such sweeping generalizations come within a context that lacks any evidence or examples. The medieval European image of the 'lewd Muslims', which Normal Daniel speaks of, is explicit in Low's text.<sup>181</sup> Consider his description of all the Middle-Eastern nations— Turks, Persians, and Arabs— as possessing 'profligacy' and 'animal courage'.

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid, p. 203.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, pp. 178-179.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, p. 179.

<sup>181</sup> Daniel, *Islam and the West*, p. 167.



The 'dreary' picture of Oman that Low painted was reinforced by another traveller, William Ashton Shepherd, who arrived in 1856. The barrenness of the land and the heat of Muscat were noticed by several travellers, as we have seen, but Shepherd conveyed the idea with an ironic style of writing: 'look around, nowhere is vegetation to be seen, nothing green, save the turbans and robes of some natives on shore'.<sup>182</sup> Shepherd not only could not find any green in the area except the 'turbans and robes' of the natives, but also the 'dirt' and 'filth' of both the place and the people was a matter of annoyance for him:

Through that narrow gateway we pass into a narrower bazaar, where cross-legged merchants are smoking; where dirty, lazy soldiers squat, hugging their matchlocks; and women with bare legs and covered faces, jostle against us; where ebony slaves in the full knowledge that you are not their master, elbow you; where ragged boys point at you; and dogs, cats, chickens, goats, and filth, stare you everywhere in the face.<sup>183</sup>

As for the heat of Muscat, Shepherd tells the tale of an English sailor who, when asked 'what like a place is it, Jack?' replied, 'Why, there is only a sheet of brown paper between it and hell!'<sup>184</sup>

Shepherd, like Low, looked down on all the peoples of Oman. For example, he describes a Bedouin 'with his ringletted hair, and naked sabre', with these words:

There are a dozen of them in charge of the Imaum's stables, ugly-looking customers, with their matchlocks piled against the wall, and a peculiar look in their leering eyes, that said, "We hold our lives cheap, and would not think much of taking yours!"<sup>185</sup>

Such a view, especially the idea of barbarous hostility which is implied in the last line of the passage, runs against the image depicted by Heude, as we have seen in the

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<sup>182</sup> William Ashton Shepherd, *From Bombay to Bushire, and Bussora; Including an Account of the Present State of Persia, and Notes on the Persian War* (London: Richard Bentley, 1857), p. 43.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, pp. 50-51.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, pp. 57-58.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, p. 56.

Romantic period, who considered the Bedouin as 'the lord of creation'. Not only the Bedouins, but also the natives of Muscat were attacked: 'the inhabitants live and die, in a state of mental slavery, and tended by dark Nubians, whom they hold in bondage'. It seems that the 'kindness' of treating slaves in Oman, which was remarked on by many travellers, was perceived by Shepherd as 'bondage'. In this respect, he claims that as he was leaving Muscat, 'two fugitive slaves were discovered' on board the ship. They ran away, he claims, from the brutality of their masters, who had 'several times hung them up by their neck until they were nearly dead, and then flogged them until they fainted'.<sup>186</sup> Shepherd charges the natives with dullness and sleepiness through a comparison between them and the Sultan's interpreter Mahmud bin Khamis, who spoke English perfectly, and was interested in French and English history and literature. This person was admired by Shepherd, who describes him as following:

Mahmood, though a Mussulman, —of a very liberal kind, since he ate ham and drank wine with the best of us,—was by birth an African, a native of Zanzibar, and by constitution, mental and bodily, of far, very far, superior capacity to the dull, sleepy, unenergetic Asiatic, as most of his race are.<sup>187</sup>

Mahmud, therefore, deserved all this praise and superiority over his race, in the mind of Shepherd, because he 'ate ham and drank wine'. In other words, Shepherd means to say that Mahmud became Westernised and, thus, liberal and energetic. He cleared himself of being a 'dull, sleepy, unenergetic Asiatic'.

William Gifford Palgrave visited Oman in 1863. He visited Hormuz and traversed the Coast of Oman reaching Suhar, and then sailed to Muscat. Palgrave has been described as 'the most mysterious of all the English explorers of Arabia'.<sup>188</sup> One of

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid, pp. 64-65.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

<sup>188</sup> Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby: The English Romance with Arabia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989), p. 84.



his biographers, J. A. Hamilton, argues that his early impressions of Arabia arose from reading a translation of the legendary Arab romance *Antar*, which gave him a predilection for missionary work among the Arabian peoples. Thus, Hamilton maintains, he commenced an adventurous journey across Central Arabia, disguised as a Syrian Christian doctor and merchant, aiming to find out how far a missionary project was possible 'among pure Arabs'.<sup>189</sup> Some critics, however, have raised doubts about Palgrave's visit to Oman. St John Philby, for instance, attacked him in chapter nine of his *Heart of Arabia*, claiming that he had never travelled further than Hail in Saudi Arabia.<sup>190</sup> On the other hand, Robin Bidwell asserts that 'his account of Muscat has been accepted as accurate by most writers', and Kathryn Tidrick argues that the idea that Palgrave may have been spying for Napoleon III, which has not been demonstrated yet, 'seems to have been the basis of the animus' against him.<sup>191</sup>

Palgrave devotes three chapters of his *Narrative* to Oman. His attitudes towards the area and its people are founded on the idea that the Omanis shared particular qualities with other Arabs in Arabia. His travels among Syrians, the Wahhabis and the natives of Oman led him to compare them in terms of doctrine, manners and customs. He speaks of the Ibadism in Oman as a revolutionary sect that had its own particularity among other Islamic sects:

The tenets of Ebn-Abd-el- Wahhab, and even of Mohammet himself, meet with slender countenance in `Oman, where, even more than Hasa, religious belief, blended with the civil and moral existence of the people, has a very ambiguous and multiform stamp; the

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<sup>189</sup> J. A. Hamilton, 'Palgrave, William Gifford' in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by Sidney Lee (London: Smith, 1895), XXXXIII, pp. 109-110. (p. 109).

<sup>190</sup> St John Philby, *The Heart of Arabia: A Record of Travel & Exploration*, 2 vols (London: Constable, 1922), II, pp. 117-156.

<sup>191</sup> See Bidwell, 'Bibliographical Notes on European accounts of Muscat 1500-1900', p. 152., and Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby*, p. 94. For the debate about Palgrave's journeys see: Benjamin Braude, 'Palgrave and his Critics, the Origins and Implications of a Controversy: Part One, the Nineteenth Century — the Abyssinian Imbroglio' *Arabian Studies*, 7 (1985), 97-138.

natural result of new creeds half adopted and engrafted on old ones but half laid aside.<sup>192</sup>

Palgrave felt repugnance for the Wahhabis, because of their fanaticism which he experienced in their lands to the extent that he was condemned to death. This, and by contrast, his good impression of the 'civility' of the people in Oman, led him to exaggerate when presenting the Ibadism sect as a revolution not only against the Wahhabism, but also against the tenets of 'Mohammet himself'. At several points in the *Narrative*, Palgrave insists that the people of Oman were different from other Muslims. Sometimes, he offers odd views about their religion. He claims, for example, that the natives of Oman, having rejected all further interaction with the 'troublous Mahometan world' and abolished both 'the pilgrimage of Mecca and the law of Coran', remained distant, free to follow what form of government and religion satisfied them best, without foreign interference or obligatory tenets.<sup>193</sup> The laws of inheritance, Palgrave maintains, were also different from 'those laid down in the Qoran'; the split of the female 'being here equal to that of the male, not one half only'.<sup>194</sup> Palgrave also states, like some previous travellers, that 'wine is freely and avowedly drunk' in Oman, especially in the Green Mountain area where the vineyards were cultivated.<sup>195</sup>

The status of woman in Oman is also presented by Palgrave as a peculiarity of the Omanis. In general, he argues, women enjoyed more opportunities with men in Oman than elsewhere, 'nor are their faces subjected to the Islamitic veil'. According to him, this formed a real advantage 'since the feminine beauty of Oman is unrivalled in Arabia, perhaps in Asia'.<sup>196</sup> Moreover, Palgrave asserts that he saw in the Wahhabi

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<sup>192</sup> Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey*, II, p. 257.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, p. 261.

<sup>194</sup> This is a notion that does not exist, to the best of my knowledge, in the creeds of Ibadism.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, p. 264.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, p. 264.



lands, Nejed, Hasa and Jowf, that they distinguished, strictly, between men and women.

The case, however, was different in Oman:

But in Oman the mutual footing of the sexes is almost European, and the harem is scarcely less open to visitors than the rest of the house; while in daily life the women of the family come freely forward, show themselves, and talk, like reasonable beings, very different from the silent and muffled status of Nejed and Riad.<sup>197</sup>

Beside the status of women in Oman, Palgrave found 'toleration' a matter of difference between the Omanis and other Muslim nations. He criticises the Danish traveller Niebuhr who visited Muscat in 1765, accusing him of providing 'hearsay details' about Oman and its people.<sup>198</sup> According to him, Niebuhr:

fell into the error, not unnatural in so short a stay, of attributing the severity of Wahhabee manners, their abstinence from tobacco, their regular attendance at prayer, their simplicity of apparel, in a word all the distinctive features of their sect, to the native population of the land, and pronounces the Biadeeyah not only orthodox Muslims, but almost fervent ascetics.<sup>199</sup>

Palgrave, therefore, believes that the Danish traveller confused the Wahhabis who used to visit Muscat with the natives. The truth, he claims, was different because, regarding tobacco, the market-places of Muscat and of the other towns were 'full of tobacco-shops, and the mouths full of pipes'. For prayers, he argues, there were many mosques in Muscat, but 'it would be very hard to find a single Biadee in those or in any other mosques'. In terms of simplicity of dress, Palgrave asserts that he feared that Omanis

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid, p. 330.

<sup>198</sup> Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815) was a pioneer Danish traveller in Arabia. In 1760 he joined the scientific expedition sent by Frederick V of Denmark to explore Egypt, Syria and Arabia. The team consisted of, including Niebuhr, Friedrich Christian von Haven; a Danish linguist and Orientalist, Peter Forrskal; a Swedish botanist, Christian Carl Kramer; a Danish physician and zoologist, and Georg Baurenfeind; a German artist. The expedition spent a year in Egypt and then sailed to Jeddah continuing on their way down to Yemen. There, they collapsed one after another as they contracted malaria. Niebur was the only survivor who continued his exploration visiting Muscat, Bushire, Shiraz, Baghdad, Damascus and Constantinople. His journey is told in his work *Travels through Arabia, and other Countries in the East*, Translated from German by Robert Heron, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Printed for R. Morison, 1792). His account of Muscat is available in volume II, pp.113-125.

<sup>199</sup> Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey*, p. 265.

had no better claim to Niebuhr's praise than 'the inhabitants of Vienna or of Paris'. Thus, as refutation of Niebuhr's claims, Palgrave concludes his image of the people of Oman with these words:

In disposition they are decidedly, so far as my experience goes, the best-tempered, the most hospitable, in a word the most amiable, of all the Arab race. Toleration to a degree not often attained even in Europe, exists here for all races, religions, and customs; Jews, Christians, Mahometans, Hindoos, all may freely worship God after their own several fashions, dress as they think best, marry and inherit without restriction, bury or burn their dead as fancy takes them; no one asks a question, no one molests, no one hinders.<sup>200</sup>

In order to appreciate such a positive picture, one should consider its historical dominion and its counterparts elsewhere in the East. The Wahhabis, for instance, have been considered by many travellers as 'fanatical' and 'barbarous'. Palgrave, himself, narrowly, escaped death at their hands, as they did not tolerate any 'infidel' in their territories. Not only non-Moslems but also, as Palgrave proves in his narrative, other sects of Islam were targeted. Their bloody expeditions to Oman were directed, he argues, against the 'enemies of God' and justified by the 'infidelity of Oman'.<sup>201</sup> Thus, they were detested by the Omanis to the extent that when Palgrave met with a native in Suhar, the latter told him 'if matters came so far that either the Muslims or the English must be masters of our country, we should decidedly prefer the latter, or even the devil in person, to rule us, rather than the Muslims'.<sup>202</sup>

Another topic that Palgrave discusses as an example of the peculiarity of Arabs of Oman is the status of slaves. Many travellers, as we have seen, remarked on the 'kindness' of Arabs in treating their slaves, but Palgrave singled out the Omanis with such kindness not only among Europeans but also among other Arab races. Before

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid, pp. 265-266.

<sup>201</sup> For the crimes of the Wahhabis in Oman, see Palgrave, *Narrative*, pp. 276-299.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, pp. 335-336.



discussing slavery in Oman, he advises his readers not to consider it as the 'system hell-branded by those atrocities of the Western hemisphere'. He argues:

My present topic is the black population as it exists when fairly settled in Oman, and the influence it exerts on this part of Arabia, an influence hardly to be understood by our own unamalgamating Anglo-Saxons, but deeply felt and widely extended among the more impressible Kahtanee population.<sup>203</sup>

Palgrave mentions 'Kahtanee', not Arabs, because, he claims, the Northern and Central races of Arabia resembled Europeans, and the slaves among them counted for little more, in terms of 'national habits' and feelings, than they might did in Norfolk or in Yorkshire, 'but in Oman the case [was] very different'.<sup>204</sup> In the same context, Palgrave criticises England's hypocrisy regarding slavery and condemns her policy, which charged the natives of the Gulf with the slave trade, as political propaganda. He writes: 'She has also drawn on herself a considerable share of odium and (I regret to say it) of ridicule, by her opposition to the existing slave trade; and, still more, her way of going to work about it'.<sup>205</sup>

Palgrave's admiration for Omanis, however, is disturbed by two points that, he believes, revealed a 'darker side' in their characters. He argues that Oman was a 'land of amusement, of diversion, of dance and song, of show and good-living', which brought about its 'darker side in their morals'. Palgrave does not provide an example of the 'dark morals' of the Omanis, but hints at the 'beauty' of their women and the 'good-humour' of their men. Another 'stain', he claims, was 'the prevalence, real or pretended, of the black art, and a superstitious belief in sorcery'. For such practices, he maintains, Oman went under the ill-sounding name of 'Belad-es-Soharah' or 'the land of Enchanters'. In Oman, Palgrave heard many tales of men, 'translated' by elderly ladies or male

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid, p. 271.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, p. 272.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid, p. 303.

magicians into beasts, besides dreadful narratives of 'invisible sorcerers, of magic transmutations, and of philtres surpassing all in the Arabian Nights or Grimm's Stories'.<sup>206</sup>

Theodore and Mabel Bent visited Muscat and Dhofar in 1889 and 1895, respectively.<sup>207</sup> It seems that the Bents did not find anything very pleasing in Muscat. They found the shore of the town 'very unpleasant, reeking with smells, and at low tide lined with all the refuse and offal of the place'.<sup>208</sup> Elsewhere, the interior of this city was 'particularly gloomy', the bazaars were 'narrow and dirty', and even the Arabian sweetmeat or *Halwa* was disgusting because 'niggers feet are usually employed to stir it'.<sup>209</sup> The time when the Bents called on Muscat might have contributed to this dismal image. The 'powerful' and 'civilised' Sultan Sayyid Said, who ruled the Omani Empire, had died. The Sultan, during the Bents' visit, was the 'weak' Faisal bin Taimur who not only neglected the city but was also a 'complete autocrat', and the Bents observed that a convict, at his command, could be put to death either in 'the lion's cage or in a little square by the sea, and his body cut up and thrown into waves'.<sup>210</sup>

'Gloomy' Muscat and its 'autocrat' Sultan, however, do not solely explain the Bents' prejudicial attitudes toward Omani history and politics. When they describe the Omani struggle against the Portuguese invaders, they represent their defence as

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid, pp. 267-271.

<sup>207</sup> James Theodore Bent (1852-1897) was an English traveller and archaeologist. With his wife Mabel, he travelled widely, visiting Italy, Greece, San Marino, Abyssinia, South Africa, Bahrain, and Oman. His archaeological investigations in Yemen and Southern Arabia led him to discover the routes of the frankincense merchants in ancient times. Bent's travels and explorations are told in his works: *A Freak of Freedom Or the Republic of San Marino* (London: Longmans, 1879), *The Cyclades or Life among The Insular Greeks* (London: Longmans, 1885), *Early Voyages and Travels in the Levant* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1893), *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland* (London: Longmans Green, 1893), *The Sacred City of the Ethiopians: Being a Record of Travel and Research in Abyssinia in 1893* (London: Longmans, 1893), *Southern Arabia* (London: Smith, 1900). For more details, see Anon, 'Obituary: J. Theodore Bent, F. S. A.', *Geographical Journal*, 9, no. 6. (1897), pp. 670-671.

<sup>208</sup> Bent, *Southern Arabia*, p. 48.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, p. 58.



'treacherous intentions'. Also, they consider the Portuguese as the 'intrepid pioneers of civilization', although, through telling the story of their occupation of Oman, they confess that the invaders burnt and destroyed Muscat utterly, and 'cut off the ears and noses of the prisoners'.<sup>211</sup> Indeed, the Bents' imperial tendencies reached their peak in articulating the requirement of British existence in the Gulf: 'We keep a British ship of war in the Gulf. We feel that those countries should remain under our protection'.<sup>212</sup> In 1895, they visited the southern area of Oman or Dhofar including Morbat, Alhaffah and the Kara mountains. When they ascended the summit of Mount Kara, they saw an abundance of water-birds and water-plants which altogether formed 'one of the most ideal spots [they] had ever seen'. They also found the people 'very kind'.<sup>213</sup>

Along with the Bents, Lord Curzon, who visited Muscat in 1892 during his survey of the 'Persian Gulf', speaks in the same imperial tone, in his work *Persia and the Persian Question*. I have quoted, previously, his vision of the Anglo-Omani relationship, in which he considered Oman a British colony: 'we subsidise its ruler; we dictate its policy; we should tolerate no alien interference'. Indeed, Curzon speaks of the English intervention in the Gulf as a definite necessity. It was the obligation of 'Great Britain' to 'secure' the lives of the people of the Gulf from their 'piracy' and 'strife'. He states:

It is no exaggeration to say that the lives and properties of hundreds of thousands of human beings are secured by this British Protectorate of the Persian Gulf. [...] Hundreds of British lives and millions of British Money have been spent in the pacification of these troublous waters.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid, pp. 49-51.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, pp. 256-267.

<sup>214</sup> Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, p. 464.



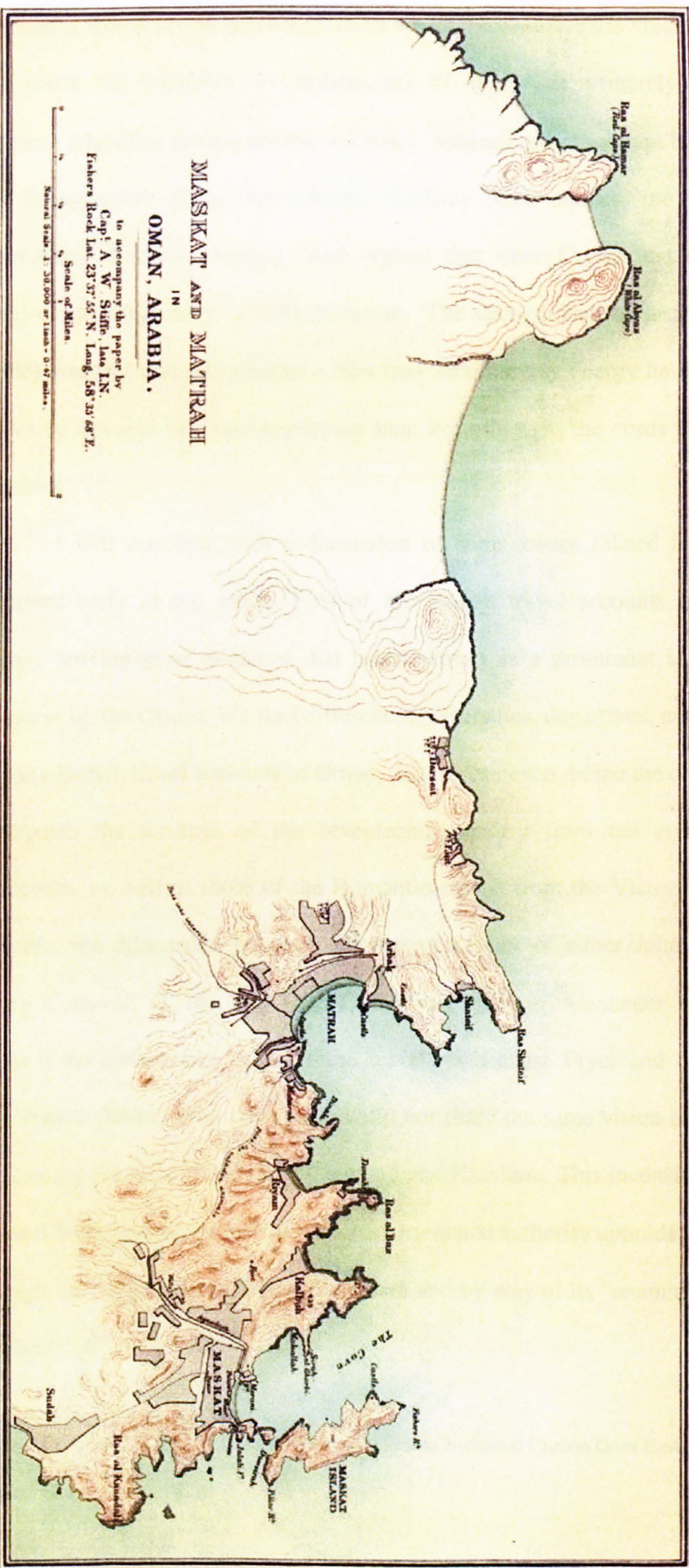


Figure 4 – Captain Arthur W. Stiffe's map of Muscat, 1897.



Obviously, this is not so much a traveller's voice, it is rather the voice of the politician who wants the 'subaltern' to confirm, not to 'speak'. It is merely the logic of the coloniser who does not require the colonised 'subject' only to accept his hegemony, but also to appreciate it. In this context, Geoffrey Nash notices 'the rhetoric of high imperialism' Curzon's writing. Nash reports that when Curzon came back from his round-the-world journey in 1893, he wrote: 'The strength and the greatness of England [made] you feel that every nerve a man may strain, every energy he may put forward, cannot be devoted to a nobler purpose than keeping tight the cords that hold India to ourselves'.<sup>215</sup>

I will conclude with a discussion of some issues related to the hypotheses discussed early in this study. First of all, British travel accounts examined in this chapter provide good evidence that heterogeneity is a prominent aspect of Western discourse on the Orient. We find differences, diversities, departures, and inconsistencies in many British travel accounts of Oman, and we can even define the characteristics that distinguish the writings of the seventeenth century from the eighteenth and the nineteenth, as well as those of the Romantic period from the Victorian. Consider, for example, the differences between the representations of either John Fryer (1677) or Henry Cornwall (1716), and John Ovington (1693) or Alexander Hamilton (1715). There is no consistency among these travellers because Fryer and Ovington, though they visited Oman in the same period, did not share the same vision of the natives, and one can say the same thing about Cornwall and Hamilton. This inconsistency challenges Edward Said's project, which argues that Orientalist authority upholds its discursiveness through the hidden structure of Orientalism and by way of its "unanimity, stability, and durability".<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Geoffrey Nash, 'Travel as Imperial Strategy: George Nathaniel Curzon Goes East, 1887-1894', *Journeys*, 2, no. 1 (2001), 24-44 (p. 42).

<sup>216</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 206.

Another pattern that Said articulates in his book is what he labels 'Orientalizing the Oriental'; he accuses some European travellers with portraying the Orient as 'not the Orient as it is, but the Orient as it has been Orientalized'.<sup>217</sup> Although this perspective of Orientalism, in general, is true in cases, such as Gustave Flaubert, Chateaubriand and Benjamin Disraeli, it is important not to homogenise it. There are some travellers who did not have a 'distorted image' of the 'reality' of the Orient, and sought to depict the orient as they saw it. Examples of British travellers discussed previously in this chapter include James Baillie Fraser, the Scottish novelist, who, when he visited Hormuz in 1821, did not describe it 'as it has been Orientalized' but, instead, declared that the 'wealth and splendour of Hormuz have been infinitely overrated'. Similarly, Charles Rathbone Low saw Hormuz in the 1850s and wasted no time in criticising the Romantic poets who celebrated Hormuz in their poetry. The point that I would like to underscore, here, is that Fraser and Low had the opportunity to create or (Orientalize) the wealthy and splendorous Hormuz (as described in fiction) which would have suited English readers more than the image of 'very destructible relics of an ancient eastern city, chiefly resolved into heaps of rubbish', yet they chose to convey the 'real' situation of the city at that time. The problem is that Said's conception of Orientalism as no more than 'a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient'<sup>218</sup> leaves no room for voices of travellers such as Fraser and Low.

Edward Said attacks William Palgrave of being one for the 'Orientalists-cum-imperial agents' who hesitated not to 'sacrifice' his 'individuality', since 'to be a European in the Orient, and to be one knowledgeably, one must see and know the Orient as a domain ruled over by Europe'.<sup>219</sup> This claim needs to be challenged.

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p.104.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p.202.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., pp. 196-197.



Initially, Said does not provide any evidence from Palgrave's writing for his argument. Instead, he makes sweeping generalizations about many travellers to the Middle East, like T. E Lawrence, Henry Palmer, D. G. Hogarth, Gertrude Bell, Ronald Stores and St. John Philby, accusing them of being 'imperial agents' in a statement that lacks specific examples. Although Palgrave was a 'mysterious' traveller, as Kathryn Tidrick has mentioned, and he had some prejudices toward Islam, his 'individuality' as a traveller is not difficult to show. His admiration of the tolerance and hospitality of the Omani people, despite his hatred of other Muslims such as the Wahhabis, is evidence of the multivocal aspect of his writing, not to mention his tendency towards self-critique when he criticised England for her double-standards regarding slavery, as mentioned previously. What Said does not realise about Palgrave is the complexity of his personality. Palgrave's awareness of his own nationality, as Kathryn Tidrick argues, was damaged because the son of an apostate Jew and a convert to Catholicism 'had moved far away from this simple unity of racial and religious identity'.<sup>220</sup> His interest, in his later life, in Shintoism, a faith that was associated with a cult of the sacred Japanese race, is an indication of this complex identity. It is difficult, therefore, to accept Said's hasty valuation that Palgrave was merely an 'imperial agent'. From all these arguments, I am not trying to say that Said was totally wrong in his evaluation of Western travellers in the Middle East, but to emphasise that travel writing on the Orient is a much more heterogeneous and multivocal genre.

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<sup>220</sup> Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby*, p. 88.

## Chapter III

### Penetrating the Interior: Politico-Travel and Explorations

The discharge of the duties of hospitality is as strictly exercised by all classes in Oman as in other parts of Arabia, and the stranger is everywhere received with respect. As I have treated the subject of their religion elsewhere, I here merely observe that the inhabitants of Oman are far more tolerant than the generality of Mussulmans.<sup>1</sup>

Oman's history, topography, economics, and people— all are affected by the tremendously diverse geography of the country. If the long shores of Oman were open to the world through the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, and, as we have seen, were frequented by numerous travellers and sailors, the hinterland behind these littorals was not the same. Isolated at the back of its mountains walls, secluded from the rest of the world by the massive desert of the Empty Quarter, guarded by its scanty and difficult physical communications and the fundamentalist religious creeds of its Imams, the interior of Oman remained unknown to Europeans for ages.<sup>2</sup> It is a rugged, mountainous district dominated by a range of plateaus. The inaccessible Al-Jabal al-Akhdar or the Green Mountain, rising above 3,000 meters, formed its main wall, while the al-Hajar Mountains extending from the Musandam Peninsula in the north to Sur on the eastern

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<sup>1</sup> James Raymond Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, 2 vols (Austria: Graz, 1978), I, p. 340.

<sup>2</sup> I have mentioned previously, in my Introduction, that the term 'Interior' was meant by European explorers to encompass all the districts of Oman behind the littoral area. The Omanis also used to refer to the area with the term 'Inner Oman'.



coast of Oman, created another barricade. Due to these natural geographic fortifications, the interior of Oman remained, throughout history, safe from foreign invaders.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that the Italian doctor Vincenzo Maurizi, or sheikh Mansur, was the first European who travelled beyond the coastal area of Oman and reached Shinas and Rusaq during his service as a personal physician of Sayyid Said bin Sultan from 1809 to 1814. In 1819, Maurizi published in London his experience in Oman entitled *History of Seyd Said*, giving some details about Shinas, Suwayq, Rustaq. He might have travelled to several parts of the interior, though he never mentioned them, because he wrote in his book, 'The following are a few observations on the topography of this country, which some journeys into the interior enabled me to collect'.<sup>4</sup> In his conclusion, Maurizi tells us that the 'general' remarks he provided about Oman would be followed up by a more detailed book: 'many of my letters are dated from various towns in Arabia, in which I resided for considerable time, and contain a personal narrative, as well as an account of the customs and manners of the people in each particular place'.<sup>5</sup> However, this narrative was never published.

The next traveller who penetrated the interior and extended European knowledge of Oman was Lieutenant James Wellsted of the Indian Navy. He came to Muscat in 1835 to travel extensively through Oman. His first point was the capital city of Muscat, and then he sailed to Kalhat and Sur. From Sur, he travelled on camels to Bilad Bani Bu Ali via Alkamel and Bilad Bani Bu Hasan. Wellsted then advanced further to the West and South via Bidyah, Ibra, Samed and Manah, and then he reached the historical city of Nizwa. From Nizwa, he ascended the summit of the lofty al-Jabal al-Akhdhar. Then he returned to Nizwa, planning to make an expedition to the Wahhabi capital Dariyyah.

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<sup>3</sup> On the geopolitical significance of the Interior, see J. C. Wilkinson, 'The Oman Question: The Background to the Political Geography of South-East Arabia', *Geographical Journal*, 137, no. 3 (1971), 361-371.

<sup>4</sup> Vincenzo Maurizi, *History of Seyd Said Sultan of Muscat*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Oleander Press, 1984), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

He could not do so, however, because the British Agent in Muscat refused to fund his journey. At Nizwa, he contracted a fever, which compelled him to return to Al-Sib on the seacoast. After recovering from fever, he travelled through Burkha, Mesanaha and Suwaikh up to Ibri, where he witnessed the devastation of this city at the hands of the Wahhabi invaders. Depressed by the situation in Ibri, Wellsted decided to return to Al-Sib and from the port of Shinas endeavoured to cross over to Buriemi via Sohar. From Buraimi, Wellsted was able to journey through the northern coast of Oman or the Pirate Coast as he calls it.<sup>6</sup> It seems that Wellsted attempted to explore Oman again. In April 1837 he returned to Muscat but 'in an acute stage of fever' and 'in a fit of delirium' he shot himself in the mouth, but the balls passing upwards only made two wounds in the upper jaw. He was carried to Bombay for treatment, and then went back to Europe on leave.<sup>7</sup>

In 1838, the French botanist Pierre Martin Remi Aucher-Eloy visited Muscat and crossed on foot a considerable distance of the interior, reaching Nakhal, Saiq on the summit of the Green Mountain, Tanuf, Nizwa, Birkat al-Mawz and Izki. He collected 250 specimens of plants and other natural history samples. He died shortly afterwards in Persia, but his journals were published as *Relations de Voyages en Orient* in Paris in 1843 and contained a map in which Eloy's route through Oman was shown.<sup>8</sup>

In 1845, Lieutenant C. S. D. Cole, one of the *Palinurus* surveyors, made a journey overland from al-Ashkhara to Muscat via Bidyyah, Sinaw, Manah, Nizwa, the Green Mountain and Samaiyl. Despite being disguised under the name of 'Salim', Cole was always, during his journey, surrounded by immense crowds with great curiosity.

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<sup>6</sup> These journeys are related in his book, *Travels in Arabia*, which was first published in London by John Murray in 1838.

<sup>7</sup> J. K. Laughton, 'Wellsted, James Raymond' in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by S. Lee (London: Oxford University Press, 1917), p. 1147.

<sup>8</sup> See Samuel Barrett Miles, 'Memorandum on Geography of Oman', in *The Persian Gulf Administration Reports*, I (Gerrards Cross: Archive Editions, 1986), pp. 117-119, and Marshall, 'European Travellers in Oman and South East Arabia 1792-1950', p. 25.



Wherever he went in Oman, he was accommodated and received courteously. In Jalan, he 'was nearly suffocated with the great quantities of milk' which the native ideas of hospitality compelled him to swallow. Cole noticed that many chieftains in Oman had slaves, but he was astonished by the kindness that slaves received. 'I was greatly surprised to observe that even a slave on his approach to salute the Shaikh, was treated with the same respect by the company rising to receive him', he said. From Nizwa, he ascended to the summit of the Green Mountain where he found the natives, though Muslims, indulging in wine of their own making. Leaving Nizwa, on his final route to Muscat, Cole tells us that he halted for a night at a traveller's bungalow in a village named Mettee, noticing that most places in Oman had a building set apart solely for the use of travellers.<sup>9</sup>

Along with Wellsted, Samuel Barrett Miles journeyed extensively in Oman. Being a British Political Agent and Consul at Muscat, he was able to travel out in several directions in Oman from 1874 to 1885. He visited al-Ashkharah in September 1874 on board the *Philomel* to enquire into a 'piracy case', as he claimed. Another trip in September 1874 took him to Kalhat, and a sketch of its history and geography was provided. Having arrived at Sohar in January 1875, he took the opportunity to visit al-Buriami via Wadi Jezee. He returned again in November of the same year taking the same route. Being mainly interested in history, Miles discussed details of the history of both cities, providing significant notes about the *Zutt* or the Arab gipsies. Following in the steps of Wellsted, he ascended in 1876 the summit of the Green Mountain. He started from Burkah and proceeded to Nakhal, where he described the architectural beauty of its houses, the mixed character of the population, its thermal springs, its castle and forts and its industry. He passed on to al-Awabi, where he observed the saffron used by women for beautifying. Then he ascended the Green Mountain on an ass, and was

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<sup>9</sup> C. S. D. Cole, 'An Account of an Overland Journey from Leskkairee to Muscat and the "Green Mountain" of Oman', *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society*, 8 (1847-1848), 106-119.

impressed by the sturdiness and strength of this animal. Regarding the Green Mountain, he described its history, people, fruits and industry. In February 1884, Miles also seems to have been the first European to ascend the 'Akabat el Khaza' at Wadi Attayin, where he encountered a 'zigzag path which was so frightfully steep' and was scattered with bones and skeletons of camels that had fallen over the edge and been left to perish. At the end of the same year, he sailed from Dhofar, on board *Dragon*, to Ras Sharbedat including Morbat, al-Baleed and Kurai Muria Islands. His final trip took him to the borders of the Great Desert or the Empty Quarter in December 1885. He traversed most of the interior of Oman including Izki, Wadi Halfin, Manah, Adam, Izz, Nizwa, Buhla, Yabreen, Jabel al-Khoor, Tanuf, al-Hamra and Ibri. Then he went to Dhank, Arrustak, Assuwaik and Barka. Throughout this extensive journey, Miles managed to gather considerable details about the people and their customs, manners and history.<sup>10</sup>

At the outset of the twentieth century, Sir Percy Cox, the British consul at Muscat, made several excursions in Oman. In 1902, he sailed from Muscat to Abu Dhabi, and then, on camels, travelled to the Buraimi oasis, and on through Dhahira to Dhank, Mazum and Ibri. Then Cox proceeded to Slaif, Jabal al-Khor, Jabrin, Bahala and Nizwa. From Nizwa, he started to ascend the Green Mountain via Tanuf and Wadi Habib, and then descended from Saiq along the Wadi Smail to Muscat. In 1905, another trip took Cox to Buraimi from Ras al-Khaima in order to determine the latitude and longitude of Buraimi accurately. Cox found Muscat, from the sea, forming an 'extraordinary attractive picture' and observed that its barren rocks were painted with the names of some ships, which visited the port of old. Notwithstanding the high temperature of Muscat, which was almost 'insuperable', Cox certified that he and his wife 'spent nearly five interesting years there'. In Abu Dhabi, he was impressed by the

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<sup>10</sup> See the bibliography of this study for Miles's travel accounts in Oman.



hospitality of Shaikh Zaid who supported his journey from Abu Dhabi to Ibri. In addition, he praised his ruling system, asserting that 'the Shaikh provided a very interesting example of the patriarchal system'. Travelling undisguised, Cox was a focus of attention wherever he went. In Buraimi, people crowded around him till he 'felt almost suffocated' and in Ibri 'every one, man, woman and child, insisted on shaking hands, in spite of the heat', While in Jabal al-Khor, he was surrounded by a party of housewives who, after their 'edifying' and 'polite' conversation, saw him off with 'God speed you'. Elsewhere, in Saiq the villagers were 'very kind and friendly' as they received him courteously, passing up one by one and shaking both hands with 'Marhaba-Bakum', or welcome to you.<sup>11</sup>

Bertram Sidney Thomas, like Miles, took advantage of his position to travel widely through Oman from 1924 to 1931. On some excursions, the Sultan of Muscat himself accompanied him. These excursions covered the land from Muscat to Western and Eastern Batinah, including most of the cities along the coast. Then a camel journey took him across the Dhahirah area till he dismounted at Sharja beach from where he sailed back to Sohar. From Sohar, Thomas wandered with the Sultan to Shamailyah, Shinas, Khutmat Milaha and Kalba. On his way to Muscat, he visited the Batinaha area again. In 1927 he also made several camel voyages in the Eastern area of Oman. He went to Sur and Bilad Bani Bu Ali, and then crossed the Southern Borderlands of the Empty Quarter via the country of Wahiba and Gubbat Hanish to Dhufar. During this trip, which gave Thomas a chance to experience travelling through the sands, the Great Desert or the Empty Quarter lured him on; this trip was what he termed the first 'flirtation'. Early in 1930, a political mission took Thomas to the peninsula of Musandam in order, apparently, to investigate a rebellion; as its inhabitants, the Shihuh were preventing the British survey ship *Ormonde* from charting their shores. This trip

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<sup>11</sup> See: Percy Cox, 'Some Excursions in Oman', *The Geographical Journal*, 66, no. 3 (1925), 193-225.

enabled Thomas to achieve two principle aims. The first was to provide information about the Shihuh, in terms of their customs, dialects and manners. The second was to suppress the 'disobedience' of the Shihuh people to the Sultan of Muscat, using a naval bombardment from the British brigs *Lupin* and *Cyclamen*. Thomas published his travel accounts in different journals, but his book *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia* included most of them.<sup>12</sup>

The bulk of this chapter will be devoted to the works of James Wellsted, Samuel Miles, and Bertram Thomas on the grounds that this trio of travellers journeyed through Oman more extensively than the others, and also published many accounts and complete books devoted exclusively to the country.

### 1. James Raymond Wellsted, 1835

Wellsted was born in 1805, and in 1828-29 served as secretary to Sir Charles Malcolm, superintendent of the Bombay Marine. In 1830 he was assigned as second lieutenant of the East India Company's ship *Palinurus*, which took part in a detailed survey of the Gulf of Akaba and the northern part of the Red Sea. In 1833 he was sent, under the command of Captain Hains, to survey the southern coast of Arabia. While an assistant surveyor on the *Palinurus* in 1833, Wellsted stopped at Muscat in May. After one month in Muscat, he sailed to the 'Persian Gulf', passing by the island of Hormuz.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>*Alarms and Excursions in Arabia* was published only once, in 1931 in London, by George Allen. I will rely on this book in this chapter, and the other sources will be mentioned as necessary.

<sup>13</sup> For more details see Laughton, 'Wellsted, James Raymond', p. 1147.



Wellsted's journeys in Oman are published in three works. The first is a travel account entitled, 'Narrative of a Journey into the Interior of Oman, in 1835'.<sup>14</sup> The second is *Travels in Arabia*; this was published in 1837, in two volumes, but only volume one is related to Oman.<sup>15</sup> The third is *Travels to the City of Caliphs* published in 1840. Chapter three of volume one and chapter one of volume two are of relevance to Oman. His travel account of 1835 seems to be a brief summary of his *Travels in Arabia* volume one, and his third work *Travels to the City of Caliphs*, also repeats information that he provided in *Travels to Arabia* describing Muscat geographically and providing some details about its food, commerce and people.<sup>16</sup>

Wellsted, as a surveyor of southern Arabia, was severely criticised by the commander of the *Palinurus*, Stafford Bettesworth Haines, who charged him with borrowing from everyone he met, suggesting he did not 'digest the material gathered' because he was a 'poor surveyor'.<sup>17</sup> Haines also claimed that when Wellsted published his 'Vocabulary and Meteorological Register' he was indebted for 'information never

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<sup>14</sup> See James Raymond Wellsted, 'Narrative of a journey into the Interior of Oman, in 1835', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 7 (1837), 102-113.

<sup>15</sup> The book, as mentioned early, was first published in 1837, and then reprinted in Austria by Graz in 1978. It was translated to German by E. Rodiger as *Wellsted's Reisen in Arabien* (Halle, 1842), and to Arabic by Abdulaziz Abdulghani Ibrihim as *Tarikh Oman: Rihlah fi Shibh Al-Jazirah Al-Arabiah* (London: Dar Al-Saqi, 2002). However, the Arabic edition is limited to volume one only, which is about Oman, and some paragraphs from the source are omitted in the translation.

<sup>16</sup> See James Raymond Wellsted, *Travels to the City of Caliphs along the Shores of the Persian Gulf and the Mediteranian including a Voyage to the Coast of Arabia and Tour on the Island of Socotra*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1840). This is the first edition of the book. It is curious that Wellsted did not include the account of his first journey to Muscat in his first work, *Travels in Arabia*. However, Robin Bidwell raises the question of whether Wellsted might have appropriated his *Travels to the City of Caliphs* from 'a dead friend without any acknowledgment', and Brain Marshall asserts that this book 'is an unacknowledged work of Lieutenant H. A. Ormsby'. See Robin Bidwell, [review] 'Travels in Arabia J. R. Wellsted' *Geographical Journal*, 146, no. 3 (1980), 444-445 (p.445). and Marshall, 'European Travellers in Oman and South East Arabia 1792-1950', p.14.

<sup>17</sup> For Wellsted's surveys in Arabia see his publications:  
'Memoir on the Island of Socotra', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 5 (1835), 29-229.

'Notes on Bruce's Chart of the Coasts of the Red Sea *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 5 (1835), 286-295.

'Observations on the Coast of Arabia between Ras Mohammed and Jiddah', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 6 (1836), 51-96.



acknowledged' to both Hulton and Cruttenden.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Wellsted's travels in Oman are considered to be of great historical, geographical, political and educational significance.<sup>19</sup> Both scholars and travellers have considered him to be the first European to travel extensively and penetrate the interior of Oman. Peter Brent, for example, asserts that Wellsted 'opened up to Western eyes a part of Arabia that had been until then beyond Europe's direct knowledge'.<sup>20</sup> Samuel Miles, who travelled around the country from 1874 to 1885, also declared that Wellsted 'beyond all the others' had done most to extend European knowledge of Oman, and that his map 'was the first trustworthy delineation' of the country.<sup>21</sup>

Wellsted made his travels into Oman in order to investigate the customs and manners of the 'true' Bedouins of Inner Oman, to expand knowledge about the nature of the country and map its essential towns and key places. Nonetheless, the apparent motive for his voyages to Arabia was the East India Company's ambition to protect the sea route down the southern coasts of Arabia by means of coast guard vessels and to obtain proper locations in order to set up depots for the coal that was vital for the new steamships. British concerns about the results of the punishment of the Bani Bu Ali tribe, by a particular British campaign in 1821, need to be considered.<sup>22</sup> Although not

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<sup>18</sup> See: Stafford Bettesworth Haines, 'Memoir of the South and East Coast of Arabia. Part II', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 15, (1845), 104-160 (p. 107 and p.110).

<sup>19</sup> Fred Scholz, in his introduction of the second edition of *Travels in Arabia* 1978, speaks in detail of Wellsted's achievements in his travels in Oman.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Brent, *Far Arabia: Explorers of Myth* (London: Qurtet Books, 1979), p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> S. B. Miles, 'Memorandum on Geography of Oman', in *The Persian Gulf Administration Reports*, I, (London: 1986), pp. 117-119 (pp. 117,118).

<sup>22</sup> On November 1820 a campaign was undertaken by the English and by Sayyed Said bin Sultan to suppress the Beni Bu Ali tribe in Jalan. For the British the reason was, as they claimed, to investigate a piracy case, and for Sayyed Said the reason was the tribe's disobedience and conversion to Wahhabism. The campaign led by Captain T. Perronet Thompson sailed from Muscat to Sur and then marched from that port to the Beni Bu Ali lands. The tribes were requested to surrender, unconditionally, but refused to give up their arms, and decided to fight. The British troops were totally defeated losing six officers, 270 men, and all the guns. To retaliate for this tragedy, a large force was dispatched, under General Sir Lionel Smith, from Bombay in January 1821. The General attacked the Bani Bu Ali in March, and after tough resistance, destroyed the forts and almost wiped out the tribe. According to Robert Mignan, who joined this campaign, five hundred, amongst them several women, were killed by the British. A large number of prisoners were carried to Bombay where they were held for two years, and then were released and sent back to Oman. See Samuel Barrett Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf* (Reading: Garnet Publishing Ltd, 1994), pp. 326-327, and Mignan, *A Winter Journey*, pp. 248-271.



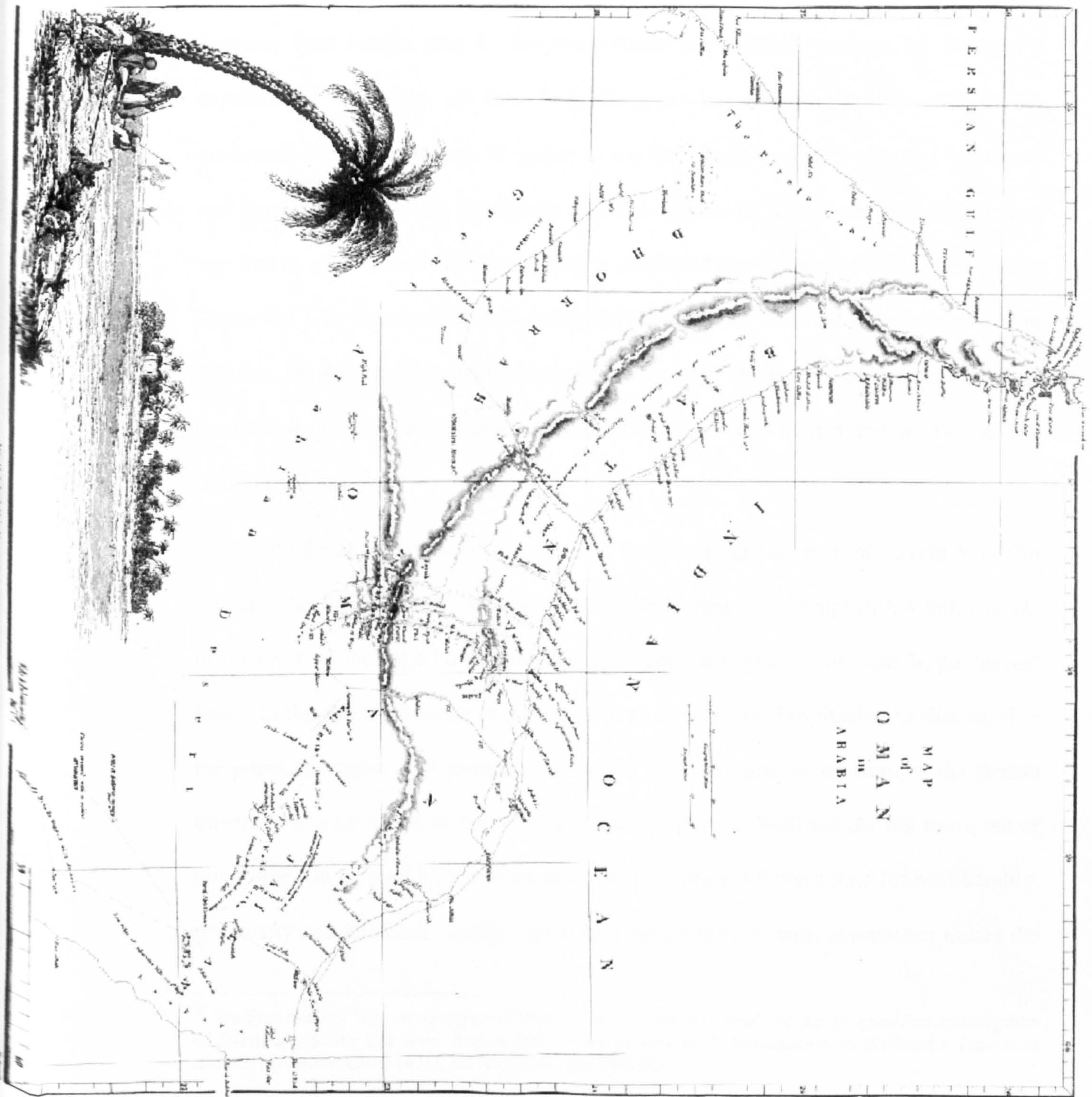


Figure 5 – James Wellsted’s map of Oman, 1835.



explicitly stated, Wellsted's narrative made it obvious that this concern was the object behind his first journey into the interior of Oman. Intelligence about the situation of this tribe, its stance towards the British and most of all its significance as a Wahhabi tribe in an area overwhelmed by the Ibadi sect must have been of concern to the British. Here, as Fred Scholz puts it, 'lay the political and military motives for Wellsted's expedition'.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, the East India Company began during the first half of the nineteenth century to change its policy in the Gulf from trading to charting the shores and mapping the land for the British colonial expansion. Therefore, as we have seen previously, many British surveyors such as Stafford Haines, Charles Cruttenden, Henry Carter and J. P. Saunders were dispatched to the area, and Wellsted was among them. In addition, employing Wellsted to explore the interior of Oman marked another change in the Company's policies towards the Gulf as they extended their ambitions beyond the littoral of Oman.<sup>24</sup>

Wellsted made his expeditions into Oman during the reign of Sayyid Said Bin Sultan, who furnished him with everything he needed to accomplish his mission. He offered him a 'fine Nejd horse', greyhounds, a gold-mounted sword, camels, guides and letters to the chiefs of Oman requiring them to receive him hospitably. As discussed in the previous chapter, the character of Sayyid Said was praised by most of the British travellers as a paradigm of the 'civilised' Eastern prince. Wellsted did not move out of this frame. On his first visit to Muscat in 1833, he praised Sayyid Said for his liberality, generosity and kindness, saying: 'no ruler I have ever met with approaches nearer the

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<sup>23</sup> See Fred Scholz, 'The significance of Wellsted's "Travels in Arabia" for the geographical investigation of Southeast, South and West Arabia and for the present day', Introduction to Wellsted's *Travels in Arabia*, I (Austria: Graz, 1978), pp. V-XXIII, (pp. VIII-IX).

<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Michael T. Bravo notes that in India the Company's move from the coastal area to the interior was reflected by the deployment of its surveyors. They, he argues, sent a team of Bengal engineers to survey the main river trade routes to collect information and secure the way for revenue operations. See: 'Precision and Curiosity in Scientific Travel: James Rennell and the Orientalist Geography of the New Imperial Age (1760-1830)', in *Voyages and Visions Towards a Cultural History of Travel*, ed. by Jas Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubies (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), pp. 162-183 (p. 172).



*beau-ideal* of an Eastern prince'.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, he states that Sayyid Said, in his intercourse with Europeans, 'has ever displayed the warmest attention and kindness', confirming that:

The government of this prince is principally marked by the absence of all oppressive imposts, all arbitrary punishments, by his affording marked attention to the merchants of any nation who come to reside at Maskat, and by the general toleration which is extended to all persuasions.<sup>26</sup>

His admiration for Sayyid Said made him, elsewhere, criticise the British government for not rewarding the 'Imaum of Muscat' for his contribution to the abolition of slavery, contrasting this with the treatment granted to Christian Spain. He writes:

For this he has received no equivalent. Is this generous? Is it just? To Spain, a Christian Government, we gave two hundred thousand pounds for a similar abandonment, and remitted some millions of their debt; yet, to a Mohammedan prince, professing a faith which openly sanctions, if does not actually enjoin, slavery, we have given our acknowledgments!—at least, I hope we have, though I have never heard of any.<sup>27</sup>

Wellsted's *Travels in Arabia* provides us with accounts of different aspects of Oman, such as geography, climate, races, women, Bedouins, manners and customs. Regarding the geography of Oman, Wellsted paints three different pictures. The first picture represents, particularly, Muscat and the coastal area in general. Muscat appeared from a distance to Wellsted, as to many travellers, as an 'extraordinary romantic' place. However, he maintains, the 'illusion' of the level roofs of the houses, the domes of the mosques and their lofty minarets and other attractive features disappeared when the travellers landed and went into the 'narrow crowded streets and filthy bazaars'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Wellsted, *Travels to the City of Caliphs*, I, pp. 51-52.

<sup>26</sup> Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, I, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 388.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pp. 12-13.

Wellsted, while sailing from Muscat to Mutrah, felt overpowered by the scene of Muscat reflected in the sea, and portrayed it with these romantic words:

At this time the sea presented a surface so smooth and glassy, that it reflected the dark hills, the whitened forts, the houses, and the shipping, with as much distinctness as from a mirror; and it required the slight motion communicated to their shadows by the long, undulating swell, which rolled slowly and lazily into the cove, to enable the beholder to determine the pictured objects from those were real.<sup>29</sup>

A different scene that Wellsted depicts of Oman is the 'solitary and boundless wastes' or the desert. If previous travellers who did not go beyond of the coastal areas were confined to sights of the mountains and the sea, Wellsted, having seen the sands of the Eastern Area, was given an 'exhilarating novelty' to his sensations. Thus, he provides this vision:

While sweeping across these solitary and boundless wastes, although destitute of trees, mountains, and water, or any of the features common to softer regions, there is something in their severely simple features, their nakedness and immensity, which reminds me of the trackless ocean, and impresses the soul with a feeling of sublimity.<sup>30</sup>

At Minnah, in the interior of Oman, Wellsted was overwhelmed by a contrasting landscape to what he saw in Muscat or in the desert. There, he describes open fields of several fruit trees with streams of water flowing in all directions, and claims to feel he was in the real 'Arabia Felix'. He writes:

As we crossed these, with lofty almond, citron, and orange-trees, yielding a delicious fragrance on either hand, exclamations of astonishment and admiration burst from us. "Is this Arabia", we said; "this the country we have looked on heretofore as a desert?" [...] I could almost fancy we had at last reached that "Araby the blessed", which I have been accustomed to regard as existing only in the fictions of our poets.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp. 26-27.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pp. 71-72.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pp. 115-116. It seems that the mythical 'Arabia Felix' loomed in the minds of European explorers as a paradigm of wealth not only in terms of frankincense and spices, but also and most strikingly in terms of green landscape.



For Wellsted, the variety in the geographical aspects of the country was reflected in a parallel difference in the climate. Far from the coastal areas, to the west of the mountains, the atmosphere was very dry in the cold, and extremely hot in the warm season; but Batinah, where the high mountains back away from the seashore, was reasonably cool and moist. Additionally, the vegetation of the oases, he argues, decreased the heat, but the weather, at the same time, was particularly unbearable to foreigners. Consequently, violent fevers, which had very commonly a mortal termination, prevailed in the cool season. Wellsted found the inhabitants of the towns always suffering from sickness, without the 'vigorous and healthy look of the Bedowins'. Ophthalmia and other diseases of the eye, also, were very common, particularly among those who dwelled in the oases. He explains:

The sudden transition from the gloom of their groves to the glare of the Desert is sufficient to originate disease, and their uncleanly habits to continue it. They are perfect gluttons in medicine, and will swallow as much as is given them; but they laughed at, and wholly neglected my prescription of frequent ablutions.<sup>32</sup>

Although the 'insalubrity' of the climate in Oman and its links to several diseases was mentioned by many travellers, Wellsted's ironic observation refers to the miserable situation of the natives, who lacked any knowledge of medication and would 'swallow' as much as was given them. The ignorance of medicine that prevailed in the country, as we shall see later, was remarked on also by Bertram Thomas, whose journeys in Oman were from 1924 to 1931.

In addition, Wellsted refers to the women of Oman, describing their dress, complexion and manners. He states that Omani women, in general, did not cover their faces except in Muscat, where the women wore a singular kind of veil embroidered with a gold border. He describes their dress:

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pp. 310-312.

[It] consists of a loose pair of drawers, with a running girdle, and a large gown or skirt of blue cotton; and their arms and ankles are decorated with bracelets and ankle-rings of silver or amber; and in their ears they wear a variety of rings and other ornaments. [...] They display their love of finery in the gold ornaments with which they decorate their heads. A singular custom also prevails of staining the entire person with henna. [Some of them] aim at further enhancing their claims to personal beauty by exhibiting on their arms and faces various tattoo devices of a blue colour.<sup>33</sup>

In their appearance, generally, the women of Oman, Wellsted adds, were tall and well made with a roundness and fullness of body, 'not, however, approaching to corpulency', and their complexion was 'not darker than that of a Spanish brunette'. However, he was more impressed by the beauty of the Bedouin women:

The expression of their countenance is very pleasing; their eyes being large, vivacious, and sparkling; their nose somewhat aquiline; the mouth regular; and the teeth of a pearly whiteness. They are, without doubt, in point of personal attraction, superior to any other class which I have seen in Arabia.<sup>34</sup>

Wellsted also makes some observations on the manners of Omani women. He speaks of their freedom, asserting their role in the society:

There is indeed but little doubt that the Mohammedan ladies in Oman enjoy more liberty, and the same time are more respected, than in any other eastern country. During civil commotions, they often take a part in public affairs, and in some instances have displayed the utmost heroism.<sup>35</sup>

Regarding their liberty and role in Oman, Wellsted found the women of Bani Abu Ali held a substantial share of power in all their councils, and in the absence of their chieftain his wife and sister controlled the tribe.<sup>36</sup> He mentions their curiosity and desire to see a European. At Ibra, he claims, when he returned to his tent he found it 'filled with' women, who were in 'high glee at all they saw'. He gives this story:

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pp. 351-352.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 353.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 354.



Every box I had was turned over for their inspection, and wherever I attempted to remonstrate against their proceedings, they stopped my mouth with their hands. With such damsels there was nothing left but to laugh and look on. Saaf, a sober, staid personage, seated himself in a corner, where he remained silent, and, to appearance, perfectly horrified at the passing scene. On one occasion, however, their mischievous pranks got the better of his philosophy, and arming himself with a horsewhip, he would have dispersed the party by no very gentle means if I had not prevented him. Towards evening these good dames took their departure, and their place was filled with far less entertaining visitors—some senseless and bigoted old Moolahs, and a few rude and troublesome young men.<sup>37</sup>

Regardless of whether the story was true or not, Wellsted's style in dealing with it reflects the sexual fantasy that dominated Western discourse, at that time, when the theme of Oriental woman allured their readers. Some Western travellers to the East, indeed, tended, deliberately, to inlay their writings with stories about the Oriental woman in order to entertain their readers. Susan Bassnett argues that William Kinglake, for instance,

was in no doubt that his book on his travel to the Orient would appeal to readers, hence the jocularity of his style and his willingness to slide into fantasy, apparently without regard for the contradiction this posed to his insistence on the truthfulness of his account.<sup>38</sup>

The image of the 'Englishman', surrounded by a 'crowd' of Omani ladies is repeated elsewhere with more sensuality:

The females here are equally bold, and more numerous than those of Ibrah. Yet, notwithstanding my tent was constantly crowded with them, and temptation to pilfer must have been presented in a hundred seducing and facile forms, I did not miss the most trifling article. I hope their virtues may be commensurate with their honesty. More frolicsome, laughter-loving dames I never beheld: they were never for an instant quiet, and, as for their chattering!—he must be a bold man, and worthy of his destiny with such damsels, who, availing himself, in point of plurality, to the full extent of Mohammed's permission, finds no reason to repent having done so.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

<sup>38</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A critical Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 112.

<sup>39</sup> Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, I, pp. 118-119.

Wellsted also speaks about the different races in Oman. He considers Muscat as a multi-cultural city in which several ethnic groups lived together respectably— Arabs, Persians, Indians, Kurds, Afghans and Belushis, practicing their beliefs and religions within an atmosphere of respect and freedom. Muslims, Jews and Banians all had their own mosques and temples. Indeed, Wellsted states that these mixed races were 'attracted by the mildness of the government' and had settled in Muscat 'either for the purposes of commerce, or to avoid the despotism of the surrounding governments'. In 1828, he maintains, Sayyid Said Bin Sultan received a number of Jews, who could not tolerate the tyranny of Daud Pacha in Iraq, with much consideration. Wellsted describes each ethnic group in Muscat separately. About the Afghans he notes that few of them made Muscat their permanent home, that they rarely entered into business, and that they were notable for keeping distant from other races. In contrast, the Belushis, he argues, mixed with everyone, and large numbers of them were employed as household troops for Sayyid Said. The Persians, he adds, were generally merchants. They traded in piece-goods, coffee, hookahs and rose-water and some of them manufactured swords and matchlocks. Due to the difference in their faith, Wellsted believes, the Oman Arabs and Persians rarely intermarried, but with the Belushis the Arabs were less 'fastidious', because the Belushis often had Arab wives, and inhabited Muscat permanently. Moreover, Wellsted adds, there were more Banians in Muscat than in any other town of Arabia, and they

Possess[ed] a small temple, [were] permitted to keep and protect a certain number of cows, to burn the dead, and to follow, in all other respects, the uninterrupted enjoyment of their respective religious tenets, without any of that arbitrary distinction of dress which they [were] compelled to adopt in the cities of Yemen.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp. 14-19.



Wellsted also observes that the same toleration granted to all other faiths was extended to the Jews of Muscat:

no badge or mark, as in Egypt or Syria, being insisted on: they are not, as in the town of Yemen, compelled to occupy a distant and separate part of the town, nor is the observance, so strictly adhered to in Persia, of compelling them to pass to the left of Mussulmans when meeting in the streets, here insisted on. Their avocations in Maskat are various, many being employed in the fabrication of silver ornaments, others in shroffing money, and some few retail intoxicating liquors.<sup>41</sup>

However, such diversity of peoples was limited only to Muscat and some other coastal towns such as Sur and Sohar; otherwise, Wellsted's writing asserts, the interior of Oman was dominated by the Omani Arabs.

Two types of Arabs in the interior can be distinguished in *Travels in Arabia*; the Bedouins and the town Arabs. Regarding Bedouins, Wellsted speaks of their appearance, manners and customs. He suggests that their complexion was much fairer than that of any other Arabs and their figures well balanced. He gives this portrait of them:

Their hair, which is permitted to flow in plaited folds as low as the waist, gives them a very striking and martial appearance when seated with their sword and shield, cross-legged, on their war camels. They have dark, lively, expressive eyes; a well-formed nose and mouth; and their pearly white teeth offer a fine contrast to those of the town Arabs.<sup>42</sup>

Elsewhere, Wellsted writes that the Bedouins never wore more than a single strip of cloth around their waist, 'all the rest of the body being left bare'.<sup>43</sup> The Bedouins of Beni Abu Hasan made a stronger impression on Wellsted more than any Bedouin he has ever seen. As soon as the news of his arrival had spread in their village, they crowded around him, he claims, in great numbers 'leaping and yelling as if they were half crazy'. About

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pp. 21-22.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

their appearance he writes: 'they are the wildest and most uncouth beings I have hitherto met with: they go almost naked, and their hair is worn long, reaching nearly to the girdle.'<sup>44</sup>

He also comments on the Bedouins' character, claiming that they were hot-blooded and that the most trivial incident was enough to 'set them by the ears', while quarrels happened frequently.<sup>45</sup> However, such a character might not be exclusive to the Bedouins at that time in Oman, since all the country was involved in tribal wars and feuds, as Wellsted himself notes. This context, Wellsted observes, explained that the Bedouins had a particular mode of sleeping in which they dug a hole in the sand, heaped their clothes, and what ever they could get additionally, over them, with 'sword, shield, and matchlock [were] placed by their side, and so disposed as to be ready for immediate use'.<sup>46</sup> He admired the patience of the Bedouins who, as he describes, with a pair of 'tattered sandals' on their feet, which but partly protected them from the hot sand, and with uncovered heads under the burning heat of the sun, would walk all day alongside their camels, without 'uttering a murmur of complaint or impatience', and in the evening would make their dinner on dates and water in great happiness. In times of pain or disease, he adds, they showed the same 'inherent spirit' of acquiescence and courage:

An old man we had with us on this occasion suffered so much from an internal complaint, that he frequently dismounted from his camel, and writhed in uncontrollable agony in the sand; yet when the paroxysm was over, not a syllable of discontent escaped him.

Their children, he maintains, were brought up from an early age to stifle all external indications of emotion; 'and whatever may be the extent of their misfortunes in after life,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, pp. 52-53.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 105.



"*Allah Akbar*" (God is great) is all that escapes from them'.<sup>47</sup> Notwithstanding, the character of the Bedouin, Wellsted argues, showed some curious contradictions: 'with a soul capable of the greatest exertions, he is naturally indolent'. The Bedouin, he continues, would stay in his tent for a long time, eating, drinking coffee and smoking, and then ride his camel for many miles. No matter what his enervation or adversities, 'not a murmur escapes his lips'. Wellsted attributes the 'indolence' of the Bedouins to some religious laws:

In excuse for their slothful habits at other periods, it may, however, be observed that the Koran prohibits all games of chance, and that their own rude and simple manners completely relieve them from the artificial pleasures and cares of more civilized life.<sup>48</sup>

However, Wellsted considers the Bedouins' amusements as 'trifling, and utterly at variance with the usual gravity of their deportment'. One such amusement was the game of blind man's buff, 'played by children in England. In another game they hid a ring, or some other jewels, under one of many upturned dishes, and the art of the game depended on finding the object. For him, such 'trifling' entertainments made the Bedouins credulous, people who believed strongly in superstition such as the power of enchanters and sorcerers to transform men into goats:

In the absence of amusements of a higher interest than these, without arts or literature, and debarred, by the nature of their government and country, from any opportunity of mental improvement, it is not surprising that the same species of credulity and superstition, but a few centuries ago so universal in Europe, should still hold its ground in Arabia.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, pp. 173-174.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pp. 160-161.

Wellsted concludes his image of the Bedouins saying that they were 'hospitable, brave and generous', but, simultaneously, 'vindictive, irascible, and in a high degree susceptible of insult'.<sup>50</sup>

Wellsted pictures the town Arabs in the interior of Oman in different ways, as his experience varied from place to place. One of the aspects of these people that Wellsted often mentions in his narrative was their 'gravity and demeanour', remarkable even among children. At Semmed, for instance, he was 'excessively amused' by watching an Omani youth. He found a huge crowd assembled there, 'but they were kept in tolerable order by a little urchin about twelve years of age', whose father had, a few years before, been murdered by the Bedouins. With a sword longer than himself, he had taken absolute control of the tent and did not allow any of his countrymen to go in without his agreement. Wellsted had a 'highly entertaining' conversation with this youth and was surprised by his 'gravity and self-importance'. He notices that the boy was familiar with the numbers, origins, and circulation of the local tribes. Wellsted comments:

It may be observed, generally, of the Arabs, and particularly of the Bedowins, that their boys share the confidence and the councils of the men at a very early age; and on several other occasions I have seen their youths exert their influence in a manner that to us would appear preposterous. But it is a part of their system of education to cease treating them as children at a very early period, and they acquire, therefore, the gravity and demeanour of men at an age when our youth are yet following frivolous pursuits, and being birched into propriety of conduct and manners.<sup>51</sup>

Another character that Wellsted observed in his travels among the natives of the interior was their religious indifference. He argues that religious fanaticism, as anticipated by most of the European travellers, was not prevalent. In al-Jabal al-Akdhar or the Green Mountain, he found the inhabitants, though Muslims, indulging in their local wine.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 338.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, pp. 110-111.



They appeared unhealthy and their faces were 'wrinkled and haggard' as if suffering from early decay. He explains:

I have little doubt but this is owing to an immoderate use of wine, which they distil from their grapes in large quantities, and partake of openly and freely at their several meals. They defend the practice by asserting that the cold renders it necessary.<sup>52</sup>

He supports this observation with his companions' testimonies representing these mountain dwellers as an 'irascible, slothful, and immoral race'. He was also informed that these people neglected their prayers and broke the fast of Ramadan; and was surprised in Nizwa when one of his hosts provided him with brandy and drank with him without 'scruple'. He states: 'I found they had been in the habit of procuring spirits from Maskat, where, though they are contraband, a considerable quantity is smuggled on shore from the Indian ships'.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Wellsted asserts that in all the principle towns in Oman where cane sugar was manufactured, 'they distil from its refuse an indifferent rum, which in the country finds a ready sale'.<sup>54</sup>

The hospitality of the Arabs of Oman is one of the characteristics that Wellsted praises in his book. In the district of Beni Abu Ali, a tribe that had been at war with the British in the past, Wellsted was kindly and hospitably received. He describes the ceremony of his reception with these words:

A considerable crowd followed after me until I halted, when I was soon joined by the young Sheikh and the principal men of the tribe. No sooner had I proclaimed myself an Englishman, and expressed my intention of passing a few days amidst them, than the whole camp was in a tumult of acclamation; the few old guns they had were fired from the different towers, matchlocks were kept going till sunset, and both old and young, male and female, strove to do their best to entertain me they pitched my tent, slaughtered sheep, and brought milk by gallons. A reception so truly warm and hospitable not a little surprised me.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pp. 143-144.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 120.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 344.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 59.

Beni Abu Ali not only received Wellsted with such warm hospitality, but also they saw him off with the same kindness. The old men, he says, 'begged' him to come back again and spend more time with them, promising that they would build a house for him 'like those in India', the ladies pleaded with him to stay, and 'the whole tribe' escorted him to the edges of the town. He left them impressed by their civility: 'I cannot forget the unaffected kindness which I experienced from this simple people, and shall ever recall the week spent with them and their neighbours as the most agreeable in my travels'.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, in his narrative he states that wherever he halted in Oman, he was received by the Sheikhs, who provided him free accommodation and assistance. However, there were some exceptions. At Ibri, for instance, Wellsted found the people inhospitable and even their neighbouring Arabs considered them such, observing that to enter Ibri 'a man must either go armed to the teeth, or as a beggar with a cloth'.<sup>57</sup> He describes his experience in this place:

[We] were received at the entrance of, and followed through the town, by a mob of young men and children, who hooted and pelted us through it. [...] It is, however, worthy of remark that, with the exception of the few articles at Obri, this was the first and only time I have lost anything by petty theft or open extortion in Oman.<sup>58</sup>

It should be noted that Ibri was out of Sayyid Said's control, since Wellsted had witnessed the Wahhabi invasion of this city, and in such circumstances, plunder, riot, hostility or anything else could be expected.

We find in Wellsted's work some polemical attitudes towards Omani culture. For instance, he attacks one of his hosts in Oman for being loquacious concluding that 'the Arabs never perform the most trifling undertaking or engagement without an

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, pp. 84-85.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 223.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 228.



enormous expenditure of words'.<sup>59</sup> Here, we can see the cultural dimension behind such a statement. Wellsted came from a culture whose people did not speak, readily, to the 'other'. Lord Cromer, comparing the Englishman to the Frenchman, puts it in these words:

Compare the undemonstrative, shy Englishman, with his social exclusiveness and insular habits, with the vivacious and cosmopolitan Frenchman, who does not know what the word shyness means, and who in ten minutes is apparently on terms of intimate friendship with any casual acquaintance he may chance to make.<sup>60</sup>

Therefore, it appears to have been a matter of cultural convention that led Wellsted to consider his Omani host as talkative. His English 'social exclusiveness' did not match the hasty 'intimate friendship' of his host.

Wellsted also criticises one of the Oriental customs that was famous, at that time, throughout Oman: bargaining, the business transaction which 'sometimes lasted for two or three hours in one uninterrupted war of words'. He depicts such an occasion:

Their bargains usually commence in a low tone, by one party naming a price, ten times greater than what he intends to take, or expects the other to give: a sneer, or stare of well-feigned astonishment, is the only answer: the debate gradually becomes warmer, and the parties shift their seats from one spot to the other. At one time old Ali's voice could be heard shouting high above that of his opponent; at another time, huddled together in some hollow, as if afraid the very winds might bear away some part of their counsels, I could just catch the sound of his voice, exerted in tones of pathos, reproach, expostulation, or entreaty. At length he would start up and retire, breathing maledictions against their unheard-of rapacity, but followed by one or two of the by-standers who bring him back, when a repetition of the same scenes occurs, until the affair is settled.<sup>61</sup>

Of course, the 'patience of an Englishman' could not endure such tedious bargains and the 'only human being' who could do so was 'the wily Arab', as Wellsted claims. The rhetoric of 'otherness' is manifest in Wellsted's writing. We have seen some of his

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 148.

<sup>60</sup> Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, II, p. 237.

<sup>61</sup> Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, I, pp. 211-212.

expressions above, such as 'the wily Arab' and the 'Englishman'. Elsewhere, regarding the Arabs' ideas of medicine, he discusses a particular incident, when he threw away some damaged papers of magnesia and rhubarb, and the Arabs, who had observed him, 'formed a different opinion, and, after an eager scramble, in which some of their females joined, they were collected and greedily devoured'. The point, here, is that Wellsted is making a sweeping generalization in terms of the Arabs' attitude to medicine. He states:

The Arabs have singular ideas with respect to medicine,□ medicine, in its most comprehensive sense, it certainly is to them,□ since they look for no peculiar results from the use of one kind more than another, but will swallow with avidity all which is given them under that denomination.<sup>62</sup>

He goes on to add:

In addition to human, I had not unfrequently other patients to prescribe for—horses, camels, asses, and sometimes cats. It is a mistake which Europeans, who have adopted this character, have fallen into, not to do so, for an Arab will never understand why, when you cheerfully attend a slave, whose loss he can supply for thirty or forty dollars, you should not do so to animals which are of greater value to them. It is all well enough with European ideas, to speak of the superiority of the human race over the brute species; but an Asiatic will not understand why, if you oblige him in one point, you should not do so in the other.<sup>63</sup>

What is significant here is not just the cultural difference that underpins this text, but rather the theme of 'otherness'. Consider, for example, sentences such as 'an Arab will never understand why when you (European)', and 'an Asiatic will not understand why, if you (European) oblige him'. The idea of differences between 'Europeans' and 'others', which until the seventeenth century, as Michele Braaksma argues, were seen in terms of a religious dichotomy, in the nineteenth century 'gave place to a sense of 'otherness' of civilization and race, and resulted in the rise of popular belief in the gulf

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 156.



dividing East and West'.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, Wellsted criticises the state of learning, the arts, and manufacturing, at that time, in Oman. He considers it as 'inferior' to the state of Yemen, claiming that he could only find one person who had any knowledge of astronomy, literature or the sciences in general. The one he found, he claims, was his friend Said Ibn Kalfan, who had been educated in Calcutta and, thus, knew something about astronomy. Indeed, Wellsted declares: 'I could not, during my stay, obtain a book or manuscript on any other subject than commentaries on the Koran and divinity in general'.<sup>65</sup> What is worth mentioning, here, is not whether Wellsted's claims are true or false. Instead, the significant point, at least to comparative cultural studies, is the way in which some travellers could draw their conclusions about other cultures. In Wellsted's case, we might question the veracity of his claim that Oman had no books or manuscripts except on the Koran and divinity, especially, since we know, from his narrative, that during his travels in the country he met only with some Bedouins and tribal chieftains. He does not tell us that he encountered any of the Omani learned 'elites', either scholars or poets who, though they might be religious, were numerous at that time. Perhaps the reason was that Wellsted's Arabic was not good enough, as he declares, to enable him to engage in dialogue with them or to read different Omani manuscripts.<sup>66</sup> But despite Wellsted's critical attitudes towards some aspects of Omani culture, it is worth mentioning that his criticism is couched in less imperialistic and

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<sup>64</sup> Michele Braaksma, *Travel Literature* (Groningen: Bij J. B. Wolton, 1938), p. 73.

<sup>65</sup> Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, I, pp. 318-319.

<sup>66</sup> Recently, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in Oman published a pamphlet of the Omani manuscripts. A general review of the collection shows the tremendous diversity of the subjects; they covered literature, religion, public medicine, and astronomy. For more details about this pamphlet see: G. R. Smith, 'The Omani Manuscript Collection at Muscat Part I: a General Description of the MSS', *Arabian Studies*, 4 (1978), 161-190, and J. C. Wilkinson, 'The Omani Manuscript Collection at Muscat Part II: the Early Ibadi Fiqh Works', *Arabian Studies*, 4 (1978), 191-208.

hostile language than the quite manifestedly prejudiced accounts of his contemporaries.<sup>67</sup>

At the beginning of his *Travels*, Wellsted claims that European travellers were 'deterred' from penetrating Oman by the famous 'insalubrity' of its weather, and the 'supposed hostile character' of its natives.<sup>68</sup> Despite this preconception, he explored almost the whole country. He admits that the climate of Oman was 'insalubrious' and he, himself, was attacked by its violent diseases. However, he tries to dispel the image of the natives as hostile to Europeans. He declares that he journeyed around the country undisguised, retaining clothing like 'that of England',<sup>69</sup> and, nevertheless, he was accommodated kindly in several districts in Oman, and even in some places was received with dancing and gunfire. Most significantly, he notes that 'in Oman travellers are often entertained in the mosque', and he, himself, at Tanuf lodged in the mosque of the village.<sup>70</sup> Within such a framework of manners, we can understand Wellsted's attitude toward Oman and its people as it is summed up in the epigraph of this chapter.

## 2. Samuel Barrett Miles, 1874

Samuel Barrett Miles was born in 1838. He was educated at Harrow, and in 1857, the year of the Indian Mutiny, he entered military service in the East India Company as an ensign in the 7th Regiment, Bombay Native Infantry. Having served, for nine years, with his regiment at its different stations in India, he was promoted to lieutenant in 1860 and appointed regimental quarter-master in 1864. In November 1866, Miles saw Arabia

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<sup>67</sup> See for example some quotations for Doughty, Burton and Lawrence mentioned early in chapter one.

<sup>68</sup> Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, I, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 340.



for the first time, when his regiment was moved to Aden, and, twelve months later, tasted political service, when he was chosen Cantonment Magistrate and Assistant Resident at Aden, where he stayed until March 1869. In October 1872, Miles was appointed Political Agent and Consul in Muscat, where he spent the greater part of his political service till 1886. During this fourteen year period he acted as Political Agent in Turkish Arabia, Consul-General in Baghdad, Political Agent and Consul in Zanzibar, and Political Resident in the Gulf. His mission in the Gulf and Oman now ended, he returned to India to be promoted to Colonel in 1887, and was appointed Political Resident at Meywar until 1893, when he retired to England.<sup>71</sup>

The circumstances of Oman, when Miles travelled the country, were difficult. He came to Oman during the reign of Turki Bin Said (1871-1888), who managed, supported by the English, to end the religious conservative revolution of Azzan Bin Qais. It seems that the English could not tolerate the administration of Azzan, which John Gordon Lorimer sums up as follows:

A white Mutawwa [a vernacular word in the Omani accent meaning 'religious person'] banner was substituted for the time-honoured red flag of Oman; tobacco and strong drink were prohibited; music of all sorts was placed under the ban; and the easy-going inhabitants of Muscat were compelled to attend the mosques with regularity, and to trim their moustaches in a particular style.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, the British supported Turki in invading the country to take the throne, but, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the early years of Turki's rule were marked by quarrels between rival parties in Oman Hinawi and Ghafri, and raids by religious rebels of the interior on Muscat and other coastal towns. These political troubles required

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<sup>71</sup> Oddly enough, Miles with all this wide range of political experience has been neglected by scholars and biographers, even the famous *Dictionary of National Biography* does not devote a line to him. The only sources, to the best of my knowledge, that speak of his life are a few pages by J. B. Kelly and Robin Bidwell who wrote introductions to his book, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, in its two editions of 1966 and 1994, respectively. Brian Marshall also devotes a few paragraphs to Miles in his article, 'European Travellers in Oman and Southeast Arabia', but he, apparently, relies on Kelly and Bidwell.

<sup>72</sup> Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia*, p. 482.

British intervention, and within this context we can assume that the motives of Miles' expeditions into Oman had a political dimension. It was, as Kelly puts it,

A natural curiosity about the rugged land behind Muscat, and the necessity to obtain accurate information about it and its inhabitants if the Government of India was to be able to react intelligently to events in the Sultanate, that led him to undertake in the next few years several journeys of exploration into the interior.<sup>73</sup>

However, Miles was not a mere political agent or an observant traveller but a classical scholar and Arabist whose experience in Arabia and Oman brought about, as Holdich asserts, a 'profound knowledge of Orientalism and such indefatigable energy or patience in collecting vast stores of information by personal research or observation'.<sup>74</sup> Such an opinion on Miles's writing is not inaccurate, as we shall see later.

Miles's writing provides observations on themes that were seldom mentioned by his British predecessors in Oman. For instance, we are told by Miles about some neglected races in Omani society at that time such as the *Zutt* or the 'Arab gipsies' as he calls them, and the *Bayser*. About the *Zutt*, Miles writes:

[They] are at once distinguishable from the Arabs as a distinct race. They are taller in person and more swarthy, and they have that cunning and shifty look stamped on their physiognomy so observable in the gipsies of Europe. The Zatt are spread over Central and Eastern Arabia from Muscat to Mesopotamia, and are very numerous in Oman. Everywhere they maintain themselves as a separate class and do not intermix by marriage with strangers.<sup>75</sup>

Although the *Zutt*, Miles argues, were 'looked down upon by the Arabs as an inferior race', they were appreciated in Omani society and always respected for the valuable services they carried out. They travelled from village to village presenting their

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<sup>73</sup> J. B. Kelly, 'Introduction to the Second Edition' of Miles's *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf* (London: Frank Cass, 1966), pp. 13-21 (p. 16).

<sup>74</sup> T. H. Holdich, 'Arabia and the Persian Gulf: The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf', *Geographical Journal*, 55 (1920), 316-318 (p. 316).

<sup>75</sup> S. B. Miles, 'On the route between Sohar and el-Bereymi in Oman, with a note on the Zatt, or gipsies in Arabia', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 46 (1877), 41-60 (p. 57).



products, as they were skilful handicraftsmen, working as vets, smiths, tinmen, carpenters, weavers and haircutters, and they also made guns and matchlocks. Indeed, Miles asserts, 'most of the trades and manufactures seem to be in their hands'. Despite their particular dialect, which appeared to Miles to be a mixture of Arabic and Persian, he concludes that the similarity between the *Zutt* and the gipsies of Europe in manner, appearance, way of life, and career was 'striking and complete'.<sup>76</sup> Beside the *Zutt*, Miles writes about another group in Oman, the *Bayasirah*. He notes, when he arrived in Nakhal, that the population of this town was observed to be multi-ethnic, consisting of Arabs, Persians, 'Negroes', *Zutt* and *Bayasirah*. He believes that the *Bayasirah* had immigrated originally from Hadhramut to Oman:

The Bayasir are an industrious and peaceable folk, and many of them are wealthy, but are held as aliens by the tribal Arabs, and are never entrusted, I believe, with positions of authority and command. When a Bayasir happens to meet a sheikh on the road he will not go up to kiss hands and give salutation without first dropping his sandals by the side of the path, after the manner of servants and inferiors.<sup>77</sup>

Another group of people that captured Miles' imagination in Oman was the people of al-Sheraijah, or Sherazi as he spells it, in the Green Mountain. He writes that the Dailemites or Persians invaded Oman in the last half of the tenth century and managed to capture the Green Mountain for the first time in its history. As time went on, the Persians were expelled from Oman but a few of them, Miles argues, remained in al-

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<sup>76</sup> S. B. Miles, 'On the Route between Sohar and el-Bereymi in Oman, with a Note on the Zatt, or Gipsies in Arabia', pp. 58-59. We are told by Al-Zubaidi, in the Arabic dictionary *Taj al-Arus*, that the word *Zutt*, is Arabicized from the Indian word *Jatt*, which refers to a group of people from India who are the subject of the expression, 'Zuttiyah clothes'. However, the *Zutt* of Oman are not necessarily originally from India because it is possible that Arabs sometimes designated the people that did not speak good Arabic as 'Zutt'.

<sup>77</sup> S. B. Miles, 'Across the Green Mountain of Oman', *Geographical Journal*, 18 (1901), 465-498 (p. 468). 'Bayasir' or 'Bayasirah' is a plural of 'Baysar'. Miles believes that the 'Bayasir' were of Hadrami origin. In contrast, J. C. Wilkinson, in his study of this Omani clan, argues that some people believe them to be prisoners of war who, because they were Muslims, were not made actual slaves, while others believe they were originally the children of Omanis by slave mothers. Nevertheless, Wilkinson, relying on the Arab chronicler, Al-Hamadani, who considered the *Bayasirah* as the native dwellers of Raisut in Dhufar, concludes that they might have been the earliest inhabitants of Oman, whom the new settlers rejected. See J. C. Wilkinson, 'Bayasirah and Bayadir', *Arabian Studies*, 1 (1974), 75-85.

Sheraijah and re-named it 'little Shiraz'. He maintains that the people of this village became gradually absorbed into the Bani Riam, the dominating tribe of the Green Mountain, of which they had become, by the time of his visit, a separate and dependent division:

Though they have assimilated themselves to the Arabs, during the long period of their occupation, in language, dress, and habits, and are only to be distinguished by a somewhat fairer complexion and different physiognomy, it is evident they maintain themselves as a separate community and keep aloof as much as possible from the Arabs, seldom mingling, rarely intermarrying with them, and never descending into the plains. Though they are said to be a dissipated and depraved race, they are a peaceable and quiet folk.<sup>78</sup>

Although Miles did not wish to stay more than one day with the 'sour-visaged' people of al- Sheraijah, he dispels the unfavourable image of this group, as being inferior, asserting that they were hard-working and that they contributed to the improvement of the agriculture of the country by introducing many valuable Persian fruits such as pomegranates, grapes, walnuts, peaches and almonds.

In addition to these marginalized minorities, Miles speaks of the tribal quarrels prevailing in Oman:

The civil war, which practically terminated with the election of Mohammed bin Nasir as Imam [in 1724], is a landmark in the history of Oman and divided the country more widely than ever into two rival factions—the Hinawi and Ghafiri—so called from the tribes which supported the leaders, and by which names they are known at the present day.<sup>79</sup>

Accordingly, when he discusses the tribes of Oman in *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf* he uses the division between Hinawi and Ghafiri as a basis for his account.<sup>80</sup> Miles also witnessed some of the results of tribal feuds during his travels in

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, pp. 484-485.

<sup>79</sup> Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, pp. 246-247.

<sup>80</sup> See the subtitle, 'Tribes of Oman' in this book, pp. 422-438. Indeed, Miles' travel accounts are also full of classifications of the tribes of Oman. He collected vast information about their divisions, sheiks,



Oman. At al-Awabi, for instance, he found the headman of this town very depressed by the chastisement inflicted on his people by their neighbours and 'the havoc they had committed among the date palms, the prostrate trunks of which were lying about in hundreds'.<sup>81</sup> At Semaile, as well, he found disputes between the two rival factions, the Hinawies and the Ghafiries, taken to extremes:

The boundary-line separating these two hostile camps is sharply defined by a small transverse ditch called Sherkat el Haida, and across this ditch many a fight has taken place, for the tribes are constantly quarreling and skirmishing. In these little affairs the combatants usually commence operations by firing at each other across the Sherkat from behind cover, and then heated with the fray and stung to fury by the taunts of their adversaries, engaging at close quarters, using their long double-edged Omani swords with great effect. Sometimes, when the river is very low, the Hinawies above try to dam up the stream, and thus cut off the supply of water from their enemies, the Ghaffiris.<sup>82</sup>

Indeed, he witnessed such feuds in several places in Oman, including Adam, Buhala, and Ibri, through which he concludes about the civil war in Oman that occurrences of quarrels were very common as 'the people hold life very cheap'.<sup>83</sup> He also remarks that due to the tribal war it was customary in Oman, when moving from place to another, to take a man or two as 'Khafir', or protector, from any of the most central tribes through whose land one had to pass. This system, Miles maintains, applied not only to foreigners, but also to any Arab crossing the region of another tribe with whom his own

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manners and customs, and most significantly he paid attention to their quarrels and their loyalty or not to the ruling family. In this respect, one should think about the political dimensions of such writing, especially since we know that Miles' observations took the form of secret reports to the British Government. David Spurr argues that classification as a form of knowledge is never free from critical valuation, and the classification of Third World peoples aims to establish definitions that accordingly will fix the kind of Western policies toward the Third World: 'investment or disinvestment, increased credit or higher interests rates, military intervention or diplomatic negotiation, aggressive aid or being neglect'. See David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 71.

<sup>81</sup> Miles, 'Across the green Mountain of Oman', p. 473.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 495.

<sup>83</sup> S. B. Miles, 'On the Border of the Great Desert: A Journey in Oman' [part I], *Geographical Journal*, 36 (1910), 159-178 (p. 163).

tribe was not in confederacy.<sup>84</sup> Notwithstanding the tribal feuds, the ability of the Omani people to unify when they were threatened by external occupation is asserted by both Wellsted and Miles. The former states that if invasion threatened the safety of the country, 'the whole body, nomadic and agricultural' professed a common faith and united themselves to resist it; in this way they had upheld their independence from time immemorial to the present.<sup>85</sup> Miles sums up the struggle and unity of Omanis against foreign occupation with these words:

Few countries have been so vilely treated by their neighbours; fewer still have shown such indomitable pride under oppression, such valour, and such an elastic power of recuperation. History can hardly exhibit anything more sad than the spectacle of this proud and noble race overcome and trampled upon by the brutal hordes of barbarians of Central Asia.<sup>86</sup>

Miles was a keen observer, and he described some aspects of Omani society that most previous travellers had ignored. For example, he provided an early picture of the traditional Omani system of learning. At Halban he visited the village school, finding it held in the open air under a large mango tree 'like an Indian patshala', where the 'pedagogue was an old moolla, rod in hand', with some male and female children sitting at his feet.<sup>87</sup> Elsewhere, at Nakhal, he visited different schools:

During my stay I visited some of the schools, of which there are five here, and saw the children imbibing instruction in the usual Moslem style, repeating aloud sentences of the Koran or rules of grammar read out by the mollah. They attend in the morning, and may be seen at an early hour hurrying to school, boys and girls together, some with a "minfa," [the correct word is Mirfa] or wooden Koran-stand, on their heads, some with a painted board or camel shoulder-blade, on which they learn to write, under their arm. The instruction given is of a very elementary character—reading, writing Arabic grammar, the Koran, and a little arithmetic being the only subjects. But the boys of the learned and wealthy are often educated at home by a mollah, and advanced further. The

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<sup>84</sup> Miles, 'On the route between Sohar and el-Bereymi in Oman, with a note on the Zatt, or gipsies in Arabia', p. 44.

<sup>85</sup> Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, I, p. 368.

<sup>86</sup> Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, p. 130.

<sup>87</sup> Miles, 'Across the Green Mountain of Oman', p. 467.



lack of method is partly compensated for by the precocity and tenacity of memory shown by the boys.<sup>88</sup>

Besides this system, Miles observed another particular Omani custom. In different towns he saw what was known in Oman as 'Sablah'. This tradition, he remarks, was very popular, consisting of a small hut, or covered platform, open on all sides with a light ceiling of rugs and fronds put on palm trunks. This type of building located centrally in the village, functioned as the 'council hall where the sheiks and leading Arabs assemble daily to discuss local politics and chat over the events of the day'. Although the Turkish tobacco-pipe, he claims, was not known in Oman, the special Omani coffee served by slaves dominated all meetings in the 'Sablah'.<sup>89</sup>

In the previous chapter, we noted some descriptions of Omani bazaars at Muscat. Miles provides us with a typical image of such bazaars through his visit to Nizwa. He claims that he visited frequently the 'busy and thriving bazaars' of Muscat, Samail, Buhla and Sohar, but found that of Nizwa of particular attraction. He observes:

Such glimpses of Arab life as watching the coppersmiths, braziers, dyers, and others working in their primitive Oriental manner, are always fascinating and calculated to arrest the gaze of a stranger. Among the artisans are makers of camel-saddles, potters, silversmiths, cobblers, cameleen weavers, carpenters, makers of hulwa—the national sweetmeat, for which Nizwa is famous, as it has a different flavour from that of Mascot, and is largely exported—blacksmiths, sugar or treacle makers, masons, mat weavers, and others. But the most noteworthy part of the bazaar, which is only shaded from the sun by strips of matting here and there, and is not particularly clean, is the copper market, which though inviting by the quaintness of its wares, is repellent from the incessant noise and deafening din of the hammering going on.<sup>90</sup>

Elsewhere, Miles tells readers that Eastern bazaars in the *Arabian Nights* exhibited much the same appearance as he saw them, being full of 'bustling crowds and streams

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 471.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 471.

<sup>90</sup> Miles, 'On the Border of the Great Desert: A Journey in Oman' [part I], p. 177.

of brightly and gaudily costumed human beings of various hues and of the most heterogeneous description'.<sup>91</sup>

Traditional Omani architecture was also a matter of interest to Miles. He gives a portrait of the typical design of Omani houses at that time. Here is his lengthy description of such architecture in the town of Nakhl:

The houses at Nakhl are built of sun-dried bricks or stones plastered over; many are high and spacious, and, though with but slender -pretensions to architectural beauty, not destitute of exterior decoration. The lintels are often carved, and the doors ornamented and strengthened with pointed iron knobs or bosses. The windows are never glazed, but are closed at night with strong wooden shutters, and are sometimes furnished with mashrabiyeys [oriels], sometimes protected by strong iron cross-bars. The interiors are badly planned; the stairs are narrow and steep, and the upper apartments long and narrow. Plaster or cloth ceilings are not in vogue, but the teak beams and rafters are often handsomely carved or painted in various devices. The windows are usually placed very low, so that the occupants reclining on the floor may look out of them, and at the top of the room circular holes in the wall serve to assist ventilation. On the floor are carpets or mats and cushions, but other furniture is scarce, and tables and chairs, of course, not to be seen. Strong wooden brass-bound boxes are the receptacles for apparel and valuables; and round the room are ranged broad shelves, on which is displayed a quaint and wondrous assortment of cuckoo clocks and other timepieces, coffee-pots, china figures and ornaments, English and Indian toys, and a variety of other curios, highly valued by their owner. In this ardour for collecting, as well as in the style of house decoration, Persian taste is very perceptible. Most of the houses have a small garden attached.<sup>92</sup>

There were neither chairs nor sofas, as in Europe, in such old Omani houses because, Miles points out, the Omani Arab was 'a plain man, simple in his habits, and free from ostentation'. His wishes were few, Miles adds, and however rich he might be, he did not surround himself with needless luxury.<sup>93</sup>

Miles, like Hamilton and Wellsted, was also struck by the common belief of magic in Oman. Near Buhla, a place that was notorious for black magic, he saw a dark pool of water lying below a remote rock on the plain, which had been famous for long

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<sup>91</sup> Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, p. 372.

<sup>92</sup> Miles, 'Across the Green Mountain of Oman', pp. 467-468.

<sup>93</sup> S. B. Miles, 'Journal of an excursion in Oman, in south-east Arabia', *Geographical Journal*, 7 (1896), 522-537 (p. 533).



time ago as a mystical well of abnormal power. This rock, Miles claims, had a notable form, 'being cleft asunder, and disclosing a deep fissure or chasm, at the bottom of which lies the well'. His companions were frightened, he adds, by this spot as the dwelling of witches and sorcerers. Miles was informed that the water of this pool had become red from the blood of some wretches who remained incarcerated by magic deep down under the fountain, and it was believed that if any one tried to drink from it, he would fall straight away under the curse and influence of the magician. However, Miles and some of his companions drank from it unharmed. After describing this mystical pool, Miles comments generally on magic in Oman:

There are two kinds of magic in Oman, lawful and unlawful, both of which are articles of faith among the Arabs of all classes. Of the former one hears little, as few know anything about it, but the latter is Satanic and widely credited and dreaded [...] In Muscat and other large towns the Arab ladies and negress sorceresses are said to hold midnight séances for the practice of "sehr," at which curious things take place, if one may believe the men. The husbands disapprove of this, and would check it if they could; but the women are more credulous, and are much afraid of negress witches. The inventors of magic are the two angels Haroot and Maroot, who are suspended head downwards in a pit under a huge mass of rock near Babylon. It is possible that the pit I saw near Bahila obtained its evil reputation from some fancied resemblance to this pit, the description of which is well known to Arabs, and which is referred to in the Koran.<sup>94</sup>

Miles provides readers with a picture of the local industry of Oman at that time.

One of the most particular patterns of the Omani industry Miles describes is the process of cooking and drying dates, an operation which still forms part of the special Omani heritage. None of the British travellers but Miles observed and described this custom. He gives this detailed description:

The preparation of dried dates, known in Oman as "bisr," and in India as "kharak," is carried on largely at Awabi, and as the season had now commenced, I took the opportunity to observe the process, and was taken round the factories by the sheikh. The dates selected are almost exclusively of the "Mubsili" and "Khanaizi" varieties, and are picked before they are quite ripe. The factory had a chimney about 15 feet high, and contained several open, circular, copper boilers, capable of holding five gallons each,

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<sup>94</sup> Miles, 'On the Border of the Great Desert: A Journey in Oman', p. 169.

and nearly full of water. Into these vessels the dates are put, and allowed to simmer over a slow fire. As the water in the copper decreased from evaporation, it was filled up again, but it gradually became inspissated by the extraction of the juice of the date. The fruit is left in the water about half an hour, and is then taken out and spread on mats or cloths in the sun to dry, after which it becomes hard and of a pale red colour.<sup>95</sup>

Miles writes that Omani dates were exported to India, and a particular variety, the 'Fard', which was one of the best categories of this fruit, was shipped to America. It was, Miles claims, 'esteemed by the Americans' and a large quantity of these dates were annually exported to the New York and Boston markets.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, Miles affirms what Wellsted mentioned previously, that wine was manufactured in the Green Mountain region of Oman. Although he admits that he did not witness the process, as it was too early in the season, he describes it from what he heard from the natives:

After crushing the grapes and mixing water with the whole mass of pulp, juice, skins, etc; they leave the liquid for about three weeks to ferment. The wine thus made is considered fit to drink in about three months after the fruit has been plucked. The wine thus made is consumed in the long winter evenings by the Sheraizi men, whose wine-bibbing propensities are notorious and reprobated throughout Oman.<sup>97</sup>

Miles also found some factories producing flour, cloth and copper in different towns in Oman. Although he doubted the 'mechanical ingenuity' of Arabs, he was surprised to see at Nakhl a flour-mill turned by water-power, and claimed this was the first kind of machine he had ever seen in Arabia:

The mill consisted of a circular upper stone, beveled up to a vortex wheel, which was set vertically with oblique floats or blades. The grain was put in unhusked, and appeared to be ground very slowly.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Miles, 'Across the Green Mountain of Oman', pp. 473-474.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 495.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p. 481.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 470.



In the same place, Miles saw many hand-loom, in which decorated puggrees and cotton cloth of the natural brown mixture called 'khodrung' were woven. He adds that blue yarn was coloured at Nakhl, and the embellished silk belts for women were also manufactured there. Another industry that Miles saw at Nakhl was the manufacture of porous clay vessels for cooling water. He describes this process:

The kalib, or potter's wheel, has two discs, the lower one, which is called "raha," being turned by a treadle. The clay to be moulded is placed on the upper wheel, and is fashioned by an iron instrument called "moshal," the finishing touches being done with a sort of comb called a barit.<sup>99</sup>

He also saw copper manufacture at Nizwa and discovered that this was one of the principle industries in Oman.

Miles makes some observations regarding the manners of the natives in Oman. In common with most previous travellers, he was impressed by the hospitality and tolerance of the Omani people. In many places, he was received with a formal salute in which the ordnances were fired off several times in greeting; the sheikhs of Oman went out to the edges of their towns to receive him and the natives were dancing and shouting. This is the picture that Miles paints of his arrival in many places in Oman. At Mezara village, the sheikh 'with a levity and humour uncommon among Arab shaikhs' put his hands on Miles's throat and affirmed he would suffocate him if he did not promise to spend a day with him and accept his hospitality. When he approached the village fort, 'an old twelve-pounder gun' was fired off in honour of his arrival.<sup>100</sup> At Buhla, as well, he was received and entertained with chivalric games. The performance, he explains, consisted of a show of horsemanship, 'twirling and firing their matchlocks at high speed, running races by twos with each other'.<sup>101</sup> Miles concludes:

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 471.

<sup>100</sup> Miles, 'Journal of an Excursion in Oman, in South-East Arabia', p. 533.

<sup>101</sup> Miles, 'On the Border of the Great Desert: A Journey in Oman', p. 170.

I was received with every mark of friendship and cordiality which the hospitable instinct of the Arabs could suggest, my reception here and at other places being a proof of the friendly feeling and high estimation with which the name of England is regarded in this country.<sup>102</sup>

He also praises his companions, who treated him during his travels throughout Oman with kindness and civility:

Indeed, throughout my excursions in Oman, I always had reason to be grateful to the Arabs of my escort, and not unfrequently to the local sheikhs, for their zeal and self-sacrifice on my behalf. They never resented the inconvenience and fatigue I often caused them, but deferred without question to my wishes as to the when and the whether; while on any occasion of unusual toil or danger, they seemed to regard my safety and comfort as a main point of consideration.<sup>103</sup>

However, Miles, like Wellsted, was unwelcome at Ibri (or Obri as he spells it), the place whose sheikh had no control over his people, as he claims. Miles considers Ibri to be the 'Thieves' Auction Mart' where the booty collected by the gangsters was displayed for sale. He provides this portrait of the town and its inhabitants:

It enjoys the worst reputation for the lawless and predatory character of its dwellers, the tribes occupying it being one and all thievish, treacherous, and turbulent, subsisting to a large extent on the produce of their raids and incursions into the Batinah and other districts. In a country where every able-bodied man is habitually well armed and ready to fight and plunder, the quantity of available rascaldom is pretty considerable, and the quality of ruffianism is quite in keeping.<sup>104</sup>

This bad reputation, however, could be attributed to the fact, as Wellsted mentioned, that this town was frequently invaded by the Wahhabies who not only damaged it but also left it in a state of chaos.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p. 165.

<sup>103</sup> . Miles, 'Journal of an Excursion in Oman, in South-East Arabia', p. 531.

<sup>104</sup> S. B. Miles, 'On the Border of the Great Desert: A Journey in Oman', [part II] *Geographical Journal*, 36 (1910), 405-425 (p. 414).



Overall, we can note some particular features of Miles's travel accounts. There is much emphasis in his writing on the history, geography and geology of Oman. Wherever he went in Oman, he tended to describe its forts, castles, mountains, valleys, plains, and rocks. He also collected a lot of information about the fruits and animals of the country. He devoted much space to the history of the tribes of Oman and his book *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf* reflects his historical tendency. Nevertheless, though he spent fifteen years in Oman, he paid little attention to the everyday life of the natives. During his long journeys he did not record any conversations with his companions which might have provided us with details of cultural encounters or his attitudes toward a people from whom he differed in culture, religion and language. He relied on his own observation without any dialogue with the natives.<sup>105</sup> The political dimension forms another feature of Miles' travel accounts. In this respect, Marshal Brain suggests that Miles' voyages in Oman 'essentially were intelligence gathering operations', and that most of his geographical and demographic intelligence was gathered in Lorimer's *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, a vast work that was surrounded by security and used, exclusively, Brain argues, by the British officials working in the Gulf.<sup>106</sup> Miles looked at some themes in Oman through his own political lenses. He supported his own government and the ruling family at Muscat. Indeed, he attacked some Omani tribes or individuals who opposed British intervention in the area. The following two passages illustrate the political nature of his writing. Discussing the relationship between the ruling family and the British government, he comments:

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<sup>105</sup> In this respect, John Locke draws our attention to the significance of dialogue in travel writing in which he believes that the traveller should 'keep himself free and safe in his conversation with strangers and all sorts of people without forfeiting their good opinion'. See: John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), p.186.

<sup>106</sup> Brian Marshall, 'The Journeys of Samuel Barrett Miles in Oman, between 1875 and 1885', *Journal of Oman Studies*, 10 (1989), 69-75 (p. 74).

Saeed's relations with the British Government were from almost the commencement of his career of the most friendly description, and though this was, of course, in part the dictate of policy—for on several occasions his rule only escaped collapse by our intervention—yet he was unquestionably well disposed to us at heart; and the son who has followed closest in his father's steps in this respect, Toorkee, has been heard to say that Saeed repeatedly counselled his children to stand at all times loyally by the British Government, and never to refuse any request that might be made by them.<sup>107</sup>

On the other hand, Miles attacks the Yaariba dynasty, which ruled Oman from 1624 to 1749 and was admired by most Omanis, with these words:

I found here [at Saija] the remnant of a once domineering and masterful race, namely, the Yaareba, whose princes held royal sway, not only in Oman, but also over the entire Indian ocean, which the pirate craft of the Yaareba rulers darkened with their sails, holding it in terrorism against Europeans and natives alike for a century and a half. It was under the rulers of this dynasty that the Portuguese, who had long held possession of Mascat and the coast of Oman, were eventually expelled from that country in 1650, and it was under the same vigorous *regime* that the "Mascats Arabs," as they were called by the East India Company's officials, became so renowned for their naval expeditions and predacious raids, and so formidable against the sea-borne traffic of the Arabian sea.<sup>108</sup>

These two contrastive texts show the ethos that dominated the writings of some British travellers during the imperial expansion.<sup>109</sup> Miles, in looking at both regimes of Oman, was not travelling for his own enjoyment but as a political agent with a particular objective. It was a matter of loyalty to 'our Government' that inspired Miles to praise Said bin Sultan and his family in the first passage and to attack the Yaareba dynasty in the second. However, charging the Yaareba with practicing piracy and 'terrorism' against their natives and the Europeans seems to indicate prejudice, because their struggle to expel the Portuguese invaders from their land and their competition with

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<sup>107</sup> Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, p. 354.

<sup>108</sup> Miles, 'On the Border of the Great Desert: A Journey in Oman' [part I], p.161.

<sup>109</sup> The influence of British foreign policy on the attitudes of British travellers towards what they have seen abroad has also been noticed by some critics in different times and places. For example, John Lough concludes about British travellers to France in the seventeenth century: 'Inevitably they all saw the France of their day through the eyes of men and women of their own age with their national prejudices and also from the standpoint of their own particular political and religious convictions'. John Lough, *France Observed in the Seventeenth Century by British Travellers* (London: Oriel Press, 1985), p. 342.



other European rivals in the Indian Ocean is difficult simply to dismiss as terrorism and piracy. Oddly enough, Miles elsewhere declares that this dynasty 'by the administrative ability, energy and enterprise of its princes, raised the status, power and prosperity of the country to a greater height than it had ever previously attained'.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, he speaks about the European and English pirates who 'infested the Indian Ocean' in the early years of the eighteenth century.<sup>111</sup> The Yaareba therefore were in struggle against them. Miles as a scholar provided us with observations on Oman in the second half of the nineteenth century in terms of geology, agriculture, people and customs, but nevertheless, he travelled on behalf of his Government and its allies, leading him into a discourse of hegemony and, in consequence displaying some prejudices against the native peoples.<sup>112</sup>

### 3. Bertram Sidney Thomas, 1924

Bertram Thomas was born in 1892 at Avon Villa, Pill, Bristol. His first opportunity for political service came in 1914 when he joined the North Somerset Shire Yeomanry and served it in Belgium. Two years later he was transferred to Mesopotamia, where he spent six years and was awarded the O.B.E. for his services, and in 1922 he was transferred to Trans-Jordan as assistant to the chief British agent in Amman. In 1924 Thomas was offered and accepted the post of financial adviser to the Sultan of Muscat, who afterwards appointed him *Wazir*, a title that was understood to be prime minister at that time. He retired from Muscat in 1930 and wrote books including *Alarms and*

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<sup>110</sup> Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, p. 265.

<sup>111</sup> For the full stories of these pirates, see *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, pp. 226-235, and p. 496.

<sup>112</sup> One of the most commendable motives of travelling abroad that Josiah Tucker mentioned in his *Instructions* is 'to rub off local prejudices and to acquire that enlarged and impartial view of men and things'. See Josiah Tucker, *Instructions for Travellers* (London: no. pub, 1757), p.1.

*Excursions in Arabia*, *Arabia Felix*, and *The Arabs*, and also some linguistic studies about Omani dialects.<sup>113</sup> He was awarded a doctorate from Cambridge University in 1935 for a thesis entitled 'The Geography and Ethnology of Unknown South Arabia', and later received honorary degrees from other universities. After the outbreak of the Second World War, he served for a time as public relations officer in Bahrain (1942-43), and in 1944 became director of the Middle East Centre of Arabic Studies, first in Palestine and later in Lebanon, of which he was the effective founder. He died in Bristol in 1950.<sup>114</sup>

Thomas, unlike Wellsted and Miles, devotes a lot of space in his writing to the customs and beliefs of the people in Oman. His observations cover most Omani customs. One of the particular customs he describes is the system of *Burza*; a meeting held mostly in the open air three times a day: morning, afternoon and evening, when Omani leaders and sheikhs used to meet with their people and listen to their everyday cares. Here, Thomas depicts this system:

It is the manner by which a shaikhly personage shows his bounty: indeed, a hungry Badu is apt to judge his lord and master by this very criterion—the frequency of the coffee-cup. For me I confess it was ten minutes of extreme discomfort, because long and intractable European legs were never meant for the sitting position—not to mention the rising and resuming with every new arrival. My legs sometimes rebelled with “pins and needles”, or temporary lifelessness, against this tyranny of the half-sitting, half-kneeling posture in which the Badu spends a large part of his day. His left haunch rests on the ground, the right leg is bent perpendicularly at the knee, making a kind of firing

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<sup>113</sup> *Arabia Felix: Across the Empty Quarter of Arabia* was first published, with a forward by T. E. Lawrence, in 1932 in London by Jonathan Cape, and then reprinted by the same publisher in 1936. The third edition was published in 1938 in Oxford by Readers' Union. *Arabia Felix* was translated into Arabic by Muhammad Amin Abdullah and published in 1981 in Muscat by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture under the title *Albiladu Assaidah*. Unfortunately, the Arabic edition was very heavily censored; the forward, several paragraphs, and pages from the original source disappeared in the translation. Some examples are pages: 10, 13, 14, 15, 29, 30, 31, 35, 195 and 196.

*The Arabs: The Life-Story of a People who have Left their Deep Impress on the World* was first published in 1937 by Thornton Butterworth, London, and then reprinted by the same publisher in 1940. Other works by Thomas will be listed in the bibliography.

<sup>114</sup> See H. St. J. B. Philby, 'Thomas, Bertram Sidney', in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by L. G. W. Legg and E. G. Williams (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 874-875, and Marshall, 'European Travellers in Oman and Southeast Arabia', pp. 41-42.



position approved of by Musketry Regulations, and the right arm more or less outstretched hangs limply over it. His rifle butt resting on the ground, he holds perpendicularly by the other hand, or retires it slantwise over his left shoulder. His equally inevitable cane occupies the same position, or is pressed back against his cheek, its slightly crooked end masked by his brown hand. There these Badus sit for ten weary silent minutes, none ever speaking, except to return a "Yes" or "No" to an occasional laconic remark addressed to him by the host. The slaves stand without waiting for the magic word *Gahwa* (coffee), with a stress on the middle syllable that has no literal right to be there, a word that sends them scurrying to their ministrations.<sup>115</sup>

Although the scene is depicted in comic mode using expressions such as 'long and intractable European legs', 'My legs sometimes rebelled with 'pins and needles', or 'temporary lifelessness, against this tyranny of the half-sitting', and 'His left haunch [...] making a kind of firing position approved of by Musketry Regulations', Thomas conveys a picture of a unique Omani custom. His irony does not suggest any criticism of the system of *Burza*.<sup>116</sup> Rather, it expresses his inability to adjust to sitting in an unaccustomed posture. Thomas attended many *Burza*, as he accompanied the Sultan along the Batinah coast. Using the same comic style, he also provides a portrait of Omani eating habits. Neither tables nor spoons were available for eating, but the Omanis, he maintains, assembled about a dish of a 'great common mountain of rice' to apply themselves, '*abu khamisa* (the father of five), i.e. with the fingers [...] and with a *Bis millah* (in the name of God)—the grace— [they] fell to'. Again and again, he uses irony to show cultural differences:

As the meal goes on, the European legs are getting cramped. A white left hand which might be strapped to my side for all the good it is, suddenly lunges forward, only to be drawn back, abashed. On such an occasion the meaty tit-bit that clings tenaciously to the bone, and is the cause of the lapse, is about to be abandoned, when a merciful neighbour—I always had the good fortune to sit next the host—stretches forth his right hand to hold the bone while the morsel is removed. But at a meal one can never keep

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<sup>115</sup> Bertram Sidney Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia* (London: George Allen, 1931), pp. 117-118.

<sup>116</sup> Although Wayne C. Booth in his *A Rhetoric of Irony* asserts the difficulty of defining this 'large slippery subject' (p. XI), he gives us four important steps in reading any text of irony: first, rejecting the literal meaning; second, trying out alternative interpretations; third, making a decision about the author's beliefs; and fourth, choosing new reconstructed meanings (pp.10-12). See Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1975).

pace with the Badu, armed with his perfect finger technique, and with a monumental digestive organization; he consumes more food in one unmasticated mouthful than a European can deal with in five minutes. With him eating is a stern and rapid business.<sup>117</sup>

This comic style serves two purposes: it entertains the reader and reflects the huge gap between East and West in terms of particular customs such as eating rituals. Thomas also observes that, on the occasion of *Burza*, a particular custom of taking coffee always dominated the meetings, when the coffeeman usually moved round with a coffee-pot in one hand, and half a dozen cups of the normal handleless shape in the other, and these were passed on round the attendance. He describes villagers and Bedouins stopping by the *Burza* and having coffee:

With the Badu the passing of the coffee-cup is supremely important; the ridiculous trickle, enormously strong though it be, innocent of milk and sugar and barely covering the bottom of the small characteristic cup, seems almost a solemn rite. Should a hungry Badu arrive, let him be greeted, a few dates passed to him and the coffee-cup, and he will regard his treatment as honourable. Kill the fatted calf instead, and give him rice, the richest food in his imagination, and at the same time withhold the coffee-cup, and he will regard it as an affront.<sup>118</sup>

It seems that Thomas was impressed by the Bedouins' high regard for coffee. Using antithesis—the hungry Bedouin regarding a coffee-cup as an honour, and when served with a 'fatted calf' without coffee considered it as an offence—is an effective apparatus to convey this point. Thomas is fond of using irony at different places in his work. Consider this paragraph, for example, in which he depicts a scene of caravan:

Curious one's passing impressions of this vigorous moving body 'as one rode along a part of it. Generally some predominant feature filled the mental picture. Sometimes a giant clockwork of a thousand criss-cross legs, long, wooden-actioned, indistinguishable camels' legs; or perhaps a shuttle of taut reins and horizontally shoulder-slung rifles; or the Badus themselves, bowing behind the humps—small, lithe, fierce brown men, with long pillar-like necks set on square, flat shoulders, and small clean-cut heads, bearded, and, maybe, of much refinement; or a sea of billowing humps; or long camel necks crowned by giant heads, that from behind seemed all eyes and

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<sup>117</sup> Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 177 and p. 208.



foreheads, nodding gently at this pace in contrast to the clumsy jogging bodies to which they belonged.<sup>119</sup>

This is a ludicrous style in which imagination and fact intermix. Thomas intends to give pleasure to his readers and also provide a panoramic picture of a traditional Arab caravan of that time.

Thomas also observes different sorts of entertainment. Poetry recitation was one of such entertainments that he witnessed during his travels with the Sultan. One night, he writes,

we gathered in a small select circle on the moonlit beach, and the caroller, kneeling in our midst, poured forth his young heart in a stream of melody. A solemn *Nashid* [...] told of valiant deeds. Although of great length, it was succeeded by another, and still another. "Do you know a *tahawarib*?" asked the Sultan; and the youngster, nothing loath, gave us a merry chant of the cavalier. "How does he remember it all? I asked, admiring the prodigious feat of memory. "A human gramophone," was the answer. "He's picked it up from roving fighters." [...] I asked for a sea chantey, and the boy galloped off a jaunty boat song, though at a *tempo* to break the heart of any oarsman. Its theme was of local colour—a fight between a gharfish and a cuttlefish.<sup>120</sup>

Thomas tells us that poems by the well-known Arab poet Al Mutanabbi were much preferred in chanting. He was impressed particularly by Saif, the Sultan's reader of poetry, who, Thomas comments wittily, had a theatrical sense and a dramatic manner that 'would have brought him fortune had Hollywood, and not Sahar, been his mentor'.<sup>121</sup> Another sort of chanting Thomas observed was the Bedouins' hymn on their camels, called *Wanna*:

It was midnight. The camp-fires, surrounded by sprawling bodies of sleeping Badus, flickered out. Suddenly the stillness was disturbed by a faint voice from the direction of the wadi. There came to the ears a chant of much charm—not the chant of galloping order of the day's march, which is colourless because of its limitations within the narrow compass of a minor fifth. There was *nuance* in this midnight note. A long

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p. 145.

<sup>120</sup> Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions*, p. 144.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 189.

tremolo wall, lasting, it seemed, some minutes, carried the first syllable of some brave line, followed by a torrent of words each with a note of fractional interval descending the scale. It was the song of the Caravan. The object of this *Wanna*, as it is called, is to reassure the surrounding countryside that here is no enemy raider on the prowl, and still more, perhaps, to fortify the caravaner himself at this dark hour, when, God save you, jinns and *afarit* [afrits] are abroad.<sup>122</sup>

Elsewhere, Thomas notes that he wrote down some of the camel chants while journeying with Bedouins in the south-eastern borderlands of the Empty Quarter. He found the Bedouins had a song for every activity and pace of their camels. He believes that the characteristics of desert song were its 'fondness for sequences and grace-notes, the absence of any interval greater than a third, and preference of ascent to descent in the melody'. At Mahadha, Thomas was entertained by another sort of Omani chant. It was the art of *Azwa*, and here he gives a detailed description of it:

The sword-dance was to be brought to a close with *azwa* or battle chant. All the villagers, armed to the teeth, with rifles, swords, daggers, and flags, range themselves into two facing lines. Then to the rhythmical roll of the drums one line advances, the other retiring to conform, blades are brandished, and loaded rifles thrown in the air, caught again, and fired. After a dozen paces or so in one direction, the reverse movement takes place, the bodies swinging with each forward step and each foot alternately being made to do an extra step, giving it a curious war-dance measure. A few minutes of this ensue to the accompaniment of the village women ululating from their quarters, and then the end files suddenly turn inwards to make a circle. Into the centre of the circle steps an old and doughty warrior and begins to chant the *azwa*—in his hand his own drawn sword, which with a flick of the wrist he makes flash in the tropical sun. Moving round the inside of the now halted but gently swaying circle with the same tripping step and looking into each man's eyes as he passes, he shouts the praises of war and the glories of the tribe. Those assembled respond militantly.<sup>123</sup>

Another peculiar sort of entertainment that Thomas observed in Oman was the *Nadabah* of the al- Shuhuh tribe at Musandam. This was, he notes, a kind of tribal war-cry, but was used on different occasions of rejoicing, a feast, a marriage or a circumcision. He describes a performance of the *Nadabah* as follows:

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 171.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, pp. 179-180.



A dozen tribesmen stand close together in a circle with heads bowed inwards and almost touching. In their midst stands the shaikh, or some person of quality, holding his left arm across his chest as though in a sling, and his right arm bent above and behind his head. Then, straightening and bending his elevated arm, he sets up a curious howl, not entirely unmusical, ascending and descending the scale over a compass of nearly an octave—a sort of vocal imitation of a swanny whistle pitched an octave or two below. Meanwhile his associates, with their hands to their mouths, *mu'edhdhin* fashion, break in at intervals with a chorus of barking, staccato and doglike. The rest of the tribesmen career about in a frenzied sword-dance, throwing their blades high into the air and catching them again with naked hands.<sup>124</sup>

Beside these public forms of entertainment, Thomas witnessed a kind of superstitious amusement practiced, almost secretly, and known as the *Zar*. This cult of the *Zar*, he asserts, was prohibited by enlightened Muslims and only believed in by some of the 'hoi polloi'.<sup>125</sup> At Sur Thomas attended a ceremony of *Zar* and depicted its performance in detail. He found the temple of the *Zar* consisting of a spacious palm-frond hut, where no iron or fire was permitted, nor could the rite be done on Thursdays or Fridays, as such things, it was believed, could make the *Zar* null. He gives this panoramic account of a ceremony he witnessed:

On the night of the *rumsa* (for darkness is essential) come the devotees in small parties, perhaps a hundred or so altogether, and usually nearly all women. Throughout the night a stream of fresh arrivals and departures in relays ensures a packed congregation and a sprinkling of new and lively zeal. To each is given a sprig of mint if the season favours. But always the air will be heavy with wreathing colour and scent of burning incense, for incense-burners are generously distributed up and down the chamber.

The stage is now set. The "zar possessed" is brought and lies recumbent in the middle of the assembly. The devotees assort themselves in rows about him, seated on the ground, except for the *Umrn az Zar*, who occupies a chair. Drums, usually three in number, commence proceedings, and in fact are the mainstay throughout. To a slow rhythm at first, those assembled now gently sway their bodies, clap their hands and nod their heads. The rhythm quickens, and in time their actions become more spirited as they work themselves up. The medium now chants her formula in some gibberish understood only by the devotees, and these make their proper responses. The night wears on, the drum rhythms are ever changing, the swaying and jerking and bobbing of bodies become more and more vigorous, and the two front rows of spirited females

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p. 228., and see also his article, 'The Musandam Peninsula and its People the Shihuh', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 59 (1929), 97-111 (pp.106-107).

<sup>125</sup> Richard Natvig in his study of the Zar cult concludes that this performance was introduced into Arabia and the Middle East during the first half of the nineteenth century by the African slaves. See 'Oromos, slaves, and the Zar Spirits: A Contribution to the History of the Zar Cult', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 20, no. 4 (1987), 669-689 (p. 674).

concentrate with closer attention on the patient. As a cobra by the piping of its charmer, the patient himself becomes infected by his surroundings, and sitting up begins to nod his head in harmony with his close neighbours. This is the sign that all are waiting for, evidence that the *zar* within him is *on* the move and will shortly be susceptible to expulsion.

"Art thou *Zar*?" asks *Urnm as Zar*.

"I am *Zar*," comes the reply through the mouth of the possessed one predisposed to answer by the faith that is in him.

"Art thou male or female?"

An answer is given.

"What dost thou want?"

"Blood of the sacrifice," is the reply, for without blood there can be no propitiation.

"Thy name, and thy father's name?"

At this stage the patient's catechism may fail. He breaks down in tears, and is possibly unable to answer at the first time of asking. He must do so before seven nights have passed, however, for that is the term of the ceremony, though it is unusual for the third night to go by, even in a debutant, without the *zar* being driven to self-confession. Meanwhile the orgy of beating drums and gyrating bodies goes on until, one after another, the fair performers fall swooning in an intoxication of voluptuous ecstasy. A similar condition ultimately overtakes the patient, and is regarded as the *zar*'s final throw before leaving his body. The vacancy is promptly occupied, however, by the spirit's opposite sexual number, for *zars* are male and female and work in pairs. And now before the second spirit is appeased by similar measures, the coffee-cup goes round and incense-burners are replenished.

Next comes the slaughter. The *zar* has demanded either cow or sheep, and as the knife is whipped across the victim's throat, an empty coffee-cup is held beneath and filled with hot gushing blood, which is promptly handed to the patient, who drinks it. If he has been possessed by a female *zar*, only the blood of the ox or ram will do, if by a male *zar*, then the blood of a cow or ewe. The feast follows. The carcass is roasted whole, and woe to the cook or other who would put a morsel to her own famished lips before the spirit's recent habitation has had its fill. And so it is first brought before the patient, who addresses himself to the head, avoiding what normally would be a delicacy—its eyes—and thereafter the assembly gathers round and partakes of the burnt sacrifice.<sup>126</sup>

In addition to the customs and folklore of Oman, Thomas paid attention to superstitions that, apparently, prevailed all over the country. At Wadi Ma'awil he found the inhabitants had a peculiar belief in secret powers, such that when their *falaj* or stream dried up, they ascended the mountain to its source and said 'Give us water! Give us water! We have a corpse! We have a gust! Give us Water!'.<sup>127</sup> He also found some people in Oman with a strong belief that the ancient system of irrigation known in the

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<sup>126</sup> Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions*, pp. 260-263.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, p. 135.



country as *Aflaj*<sup>128</sup> was built by the 'afrits' or demons of the prophet Solomon who came to Oman 'on a carpet that was borne on the wings of the wind'.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, Thomas found many people who attributed every disease to magic or the power of fairies. They ascribed their sickness to a visit to some fairy-haunted place, as a result of which, if they recovered, an elderly lady or a virgin must go to the place 'offering there a chicken, perhaps, or flour, an egg and a little fire often sprinkled with incense'.<sup>130</sup> Superstitions about stars and reading the sands also flourished everywhere. Thomas tells how, in Al Wahiba country, a mother had brought to him her emaciated child and wanted to know if he was master of the science of *An Najma* (astrology), and could he tell her whether the child would recover if she changed his name. The woman, he adds, believed that the star under which the child was born was hurt by the name it had been given, and she was concerned to find out if a change of name would restore him.<sup>131</sup> The only methods of medication that the natives used were primitive, such as cauterisation and incantation. Consider, for instance, this conversation that Thomas records with a man whose arm was broken:

"Well, Mabruk," said the Sultan as the monumental black approached, "how is thine arm?"

"Better, *Habab*," [my master] and the slave lifted up a swollen arm normally huge but now the size of four, and a limp hand grown to equally alarming proportions.

"The treatment seems wrong," said the Sultan. "You must go to Muscat and let the doctor put the bone back."

"No! No!" prayed the man. "It is nothing (this with the slave's habitual fear of the surgeon's knife). It will be all right in a day or two. I do not want to go to Muscat. Let me have a reading of the Qur-án."

"What else have you done for it?"

"Fomentations, *Habab*. The white of egg, the leaf of *sidr* (jujube), and salt."

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<sup>128</sup> This irrigation system is a kind of subterranean water system and is widespread throughout Oman. Indeed, Oman is distinguished by its various *Aflaj*, which have been noted and admired by many travellers. For more details about this system of irrigation, see: J. C. Wilkinson, 'The Origins of the Aflaj of Oman', *The Journal of Oman Studies*, 6, no. 1 (1983), 177-194.

<sup>129</sup> Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions*, p. 168.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p. 178.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, p. 279.

That evening the slave wished to come again.

“Well! what is it, Mabruk?”

“O Master!” said Mabruk, “thy servant, Saif bin Ya’rub’ who reads the stars, tells me it is not a sprain. It is the evil eye.”

“Well, what then?”

“Only a reading will avail.”<sup>132</sup>

Reading some verses of the Koran or some words to cure their diseases formed the essential pharmacy of the natives of Oman, ‘such is the holy pharmacopoeia of Oman’, says Thomas.<sup>133</sup> It is true, as Thomas has shown us; primitivism and superstitions prevailed in most parts of Oman in his time. Some postcolonial critics suggest that European travellers to the Middle East have deliberately described the superstitions of the natives in order to present, by contrast, the superiority of Western civilization. Hussein M. Fahim, for example, argues that most European travel writing on Egypt during the nineteenth century sought knowledge of the ‘exotic, the bizarre, of unfamiliar beliefs, customs and traditions of non-European culture’, and this knowledge, he maintains, was also required to support a scheme of human culture which ranked Europeans as ‘superior and most civilised’.<sup>134</sup> Contrary to this, I would not argue that Thomas planned by this melancholy picture of life in Oman to show the ‘superiority’ of his culture. There is no space for sentiment here. As we accepted the idea of self-cultural criticism as one of the considerable themes in the Western discourse on Orient, the same notion should find its position in our reading of this discourse. One cannot undervalue the significant contribution made by Thomas who witnessed the traditional Omani customs and wrote about them. His description of the superstitions of Oman is

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid, p. 186.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p. 189.

<sup>134</sup> Hussein M. Fahim, ‘European Travellers in Egypt: The Representation of the Host Culture’, in *Travellers in Egypt*, ed. by Paul Starkey and Janet Starkey (London and New York; I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), pp. 7-12 (pp. 8-9).



free from prejudices or distasteful words, such as 'savage' or 'heathen' which are frequent in other European travellers' works.<sup>135</sup>

Unlike Wellsted and Miles, Thomas employs dialogue in his narrative to raise cultural issues related to both British and Omani societies, as in the following:

I said to Rashid, a young Badu of my escort, "O Rashid! have you a wife?"  
 "No," he replied, "but, *Insha'allah*, [If God wills] I'll marry this year."  
 "Why not before? You told me you were twenty."  
 "They are costly."  
 "How much?"  
 "Sixty dollars." (Five pounds.)  
 "In my country," I returned, "we don't have to pay a single farthing for a wife."  
 "A *llahu Akbar*," [God is mighty] said he, profoundly moved. "That is a blessed country."  
 "But," I explained, "Ya Rashid, we can't divorce her. When she gets old and loses her beauty we have to stick to her, and we may not turn her away and marry another young girl as you do."  
 "*Allah Karim!*" [God is generous] he ejaculated with much feeling; which, being freely interpreted, meant, "Ah! I thought there was a fly in the ointment somewhere!"<sup>136</sup>

Here, Thomas makes fun of the retrogressive economic states of Oman at that time, when a man could not afford five pounds to get married, and simultaneously attacks the complicated social system regarding divorce in Britain. Sometimes, dialogue in Thomas's writing takes the form of religious encounters, but he deals with his conversers with open-mindedness. Consider this example about Islam and Christianity:

"What do the *Kafirs* [infidels] eat?"  
 "How should I know? I'm not a *Kafir*."

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<sup>135</sup> Richard Burton, for example, charges the prophet Mohammed with including pagan superstitions in Islam. He writes: 'The fourth error is that Muhammad, unable to abolish certain superstitious rites and customs of the ancient and Pagan Arabs, incorporated them into his scheme, and thus propitiated many that before avoided him. [...] Thus the Kaabah, that Pantheon of the idolater, was given to El Islam as the house built by Abraham and Ishmael.' See Richard Burton, *The Jew, the Gypsy and El Islam* (London: Hutchinson, 1898), pp. 333-334. Similarly, Johan Walsh, an American traveller who journeyed through India in the 1850s, considers the superstitions of Indians as a kind of idolatry, 'Being heathen, they have many of the vices peculiar to all heathen races. For example, they are very superstitious and credulous', he comments. See John Johnston Walsh, *A Memorial of the Futtehghurh Mission and her Martyred Missionaries: With Some Remarks on the Mutiny in India* (London: James Nesbit, 1858), p. 33.

<sup>136</sup> Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions*, p.276.

"Not a *Kafir*?" said Luwaiti, looking at me incredulously. "But all the people say, 'What do the *Kafirs* want coming amongst us?' And they add, 'And you, Luwaiti, Allah will punish you for aiding them'".

"Ya Luwaiti," said I, "listen not to ignorant men. I am of the *Nasara* (Christians). We are 'people of the Book' (Qur-án) and declared to be believers by your Prophet, who, indeed, took a Christian girl to wife."

"Do you pray and fast?" said he.

"Yes."

"Then you must be a Muslim. Bear witness."

I imitated him by drawing my hand down over my face and beard, and added, "*A shhadu an la illahah ill Allah*" (I bear witness that there is no god but God).

Luwaiti, satisfied in his own mind with this insufficient declaration, was moved into saying, "God be praised! Ya Thomas! You're a Muslim and not an infidel!"<sup>137</sup>

Thomas, of course, knew the simplicity of his companions and dealt with them in the same manner. He knew that these 'children of nature', as he calls them sometimes, were not religious fanatics and considered him, very innocently, as Muslim. Thomas also was free, at least here, of expressing repugnance for Islam. When his companions regarded the *Nassara* or the Christians as infidels, he did not look at the idea as a matter of conflict. Instead, he recognised that they were misled by some ignorant men and, thus, when he explained to them the Koranic conception of Christians as 'people of the Book' and not infidels, they were satisfied and declared that he was a 'Muslim' as well. Thomas shows sympathy to the religious influence on the people of Oman. When he saw the primitive system of water-wheels<sup>138</sup>, he did not look down on the process but, instead, he compared it to modern Western industry, implying a kind of self-cultural criticism:

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, p. 280.

<sup>138</sup> Here, Thomas describes the process of this system:

Two split palm trunks incline at an angle of 60 degrees to carry a spindle of mimosa wood and a picturesque, if crude, wooden wheel, both of local handicraft. The lofty wheel suspends above the gaping mouth of the well, and over its rim is passed a rope which carries the water-bucket, the other end of the rope being yoked to a bull. From the base of the rig a pit slopes gently away, the length of which corresponds to the depth of the well. Thus the water-bucket is raised by the action of the bull—usually of the humped Brahminee kind—walking down the pit, and on reaching ground-level, the bucket automatically empties itself into a surface tank from which the garden is irrigated. The bull's return journey up the slope sends the bucket down into the well again, and so the process continues. See *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia*, pp. 125-126.



If Westerners with their centrifugal pumps are more contented than these simple garden folk with their water-wheels, they contrive to conceal the fact; if they are pitying, it appears to be wasted pity. Here may be ill-nourished and poorly clad bodies—a low standard of life, in short—but here also is a sublime religious contentment, so far unexposed to the cold blasts of Western doubt which seems to be the handmaiden of progress; and no man starves.<sup>139</sup>

Moreover, his travels among Arabs led him to dispel the idea that Islam was the source of violence in Arabia, an idea that has been inherited from the medieval period in Western writing.<sup>140</sup> Thomas asserts that 'in the Middle East repression springs primarily from political motives not religious bigotry, as we have seen when Jews were outlaws in Christendom, it was the Moslem countries that gave them refuge'.<sup>141</sup>

Nevertheless, Thomas, like Wellsted and Miles, could not avoid using imperial rhetoric where politics were involved. Having held the position of *Wazir* to the Sultan of Muscat, he was hostile to peoples or tribes that opposed the regime and British intervention. His story of the Shihuh tribe and the attack on their stronghold Musandam represents his imperial discourse. Early in 1930 Thomas led a campaign against the Shihuh; the 'most primitive tribe in Oman' and the 'most difficult to cultivate friendly relations with' as he puts it.<sup>142</sup> The reason he gives for the expedition is that the Shihuh had become 'fractious' and their 'disobedience had grown into truculence'. The trouble, he claims, happened when the Shihuh refused to allow the British ship *Ormonde* to survey the shores of Musandam, and rejected a letter from the Sultan on this matter. What is worth mentioning, here, is the language that Thomas uses in dealing with the matter and justifying the attack. He considers the Shihuh as 'wild men':

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., pp. 142-143.

<sup>140</sup> We have seen in chapter I that Edward Said and others argue that some Orientalists and travellers in the Middle East represented Muslims as terrorists and hostile to Christians.

<sup>141</sup> Bertram Thomas, *The Arabs* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1940), p. 340.

<sup>142</sup> Thomas, 'The Musandam Peninsula and its People the Shihuh', p. 104.

Let the Central Authority of Government, for whatever cause, become weak, or be believed to have become weak, and the "fringe" celebrates it with an orgy of uncontrollable self-will. Some ugly situation arises and blood flows. Such an incident is without political basis, in the ideological sense, that is, for "fringes" have no flair for national aspirations. It is born of a certain crude appreciation of realities, an appreciation of the right moment to be up and doing, if the tribe is to retain any sense of worthiness of its fighting forbears. It is usually ephemeral, owing to ammunition running short and an unstable temper. The European may reflect that if he regards his own self-elected government as a "necessary evil", there is really nothing very odd in the reactions to authority of the wild man to whom all restraint, but particularly the restraint of a peaceful order, is irksome. The wild man has no inherent respect for law and order, rather the reverse. Equity and justice as abstract considerations leave him unimpressed, and as for the soft ways of civilized life, and the instruments of it, he despises them. Men who have spent a large part of their lives handling him, learn to appreciate certain of his qualities, learn also that he reverences force before all things, and that in the long run he is amenable to one form of persuasion, namely, the threat of compulsion, and, failing that, its reality. Suspend the fear of penalties, and he will give you a run for your money, if not for your life.<sup>143</sup>

Within such imperial discourse, Thomas justifies the bombardment on Musandam and its inhabitants. However, the reason was, basically, related to the 'prestige of H. M. S. ship' because the 'quite innocent barbarism frustrated it'.<sup>144</sup> It is worth mentioning here that no body can blame the people of Musandam for their protestation against the British survey of their land. The sense of these indigenous people that such a mission might not have been innocent was quite plausible. As I mentioned previously, the British scientific expeditions to map and chart the Gulf came within an imperial scheme. In the same context, Peter Raby in his study of the Victorian scientific travellers, is convinced that, 'The journeys of many, perhaps most, of the scientific explorers were part of the imperial process'.<sup>145</sup>

The complexity of British travel texts discussed in this chapter is also apparent because Wellsted, Miles, and Thomas are, thematically and stylistically, heterogeneous. We have seen their achievements in documenting and describing Omani culture and

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<sup>143</sup> Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions*, pp. 215-216.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, p. 219, and p. 235.

<sup>145</sup> Peter Raby, *Bright Paradise: Victorian Scientific Travellers* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p. 8.



heritage, and their fascination with the native hospitality and tolerance, but this is not the whole picture. Fred Scholz, in his introduction to *Travels in Arabia*, asserts that Wellsted's descriptions are 'almost entirely free of evaluation, of European reflections and free, too, of presumptuous prejudices', and Denis Baly in his review of the book maintains that Wellsted is 'scrupulous in not passing judgment upon the varied people whom he meets'.<sup>146</sup> Nevertheless, I would agree with Donald Whitcomb that Wellsted's work is not entirely free of prejudice, though it is 'less bothersome than those of many of his contemporaries and successors'.<sup>147</sup> The reason is that Wellsted joined the bulk of the British travellers and administrators in their construction of the natives of Sahil Oman as being pirates, an accusation that functioned, as we have seen previously, as an aid to the British Government in its intervention in the Gulf. Indeed, Wellsted speaks out his imperial activities, overtly declaring the less than innocent objectives of British naval surveys in the Gulf:

Being employed in this investigation for a considerable period, I had the most favourable opportunities of collecting the information here detailed. To the expedition science is indebted for those magnificent surveys of the Persian and Arabian Gulfs. Notwithstanding the difficulties and privations they encountered from the perilous nature of the navigation, the jealous and hostile character of the natives, and the still more formidable effects of climate, the heat of which at certain seasons is almost insupportable, the surveying vessels successfully preserved. The result was so satisfactory, not only in adding to our stock of geographical knowledge, but in furnishing the Government with a full account of the several tribes, their condition and resources, that it was subsequently resolved to examine in a similar manner the whole coast of the Persian Gulf. To confine ourselves, however, to this portion, it was wisely foreseen that, with pirates, as with other thieves, the most effectual way to disperse them was to lay open their haunts.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Scholz, 'The Significance of Wellsted's *Travels in Arabia*', p. IX, and Denis Baly, 'Travels in Arabia, J. R. Wellsted', *The Muslim World*, 70, no. 1 (1980), 79-80 (p. 80).

<sup>147</sup> Donald Whitcomb, 'Travels in Arabia. 2 Vols. By J. R. Wellsted', *Journal of the Near Eastern Studies*, 42 (1983), 326-328 (p. 327).

<sup>148</sup> Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, pp. 252-253.

The Foucaultian ideology of the link between knowledge and power that Said draws in *Orientalism* is manifest in the above passage. Besides, Wellsted's writing has a high-toned feeling of 'Englishness' that suggests not only the sense of 'superiority' but also the sense of 'otherness'. He comments on a visit he made to an Omani Sheikh in al-Musenah:

I simply stated, that it was not our custom to stand at any man's door for the length of time I had waited at his, and if he had been aware of it, I was sorry he so lightly considered the character of a British officer as to suppose he would put up with such treatment, and that if his slaves were our servants, they would be severely punished for their neglect.<sup>149</sup>

Stylistically, Wellsted's narrative has been described as being 'written in an unpretending, straightforward, sailor-like style'.<sup>150</sup> Although the technique is anecdotal and interesting, Wellsted's personal reactions and cultural criticism are unavoidable, as we have seen. Indeed, he describes his approach clearly in the book:

I have always endeavoured to record faithfully my impressions of those amongst whom I have been thrown, whether for good or evil. It has never occurred to me that the reader would consider their merits and demerits otherwise than abstractedly, and not as furnishing a national portraiture.<sup>151</sup>

Miles and Thomas, perhaps, are more obsessed than Wellsted by the idea of amusing their readers. They imbue their travel accounts with anecdotes that had no function but to entertain an English audience. Some of these tales, however, are precarious and they might stabilise stereotypical images about the Arabs. Consider this story of Miles, for example:

Before starting I took leave of Sheikh Salim-bin-Mohammed, whose protection was no longer required, giving him a suitable present, and I may mention as an instance of the

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>150</sup> Anon, 'Review: *Travels in Arabia*', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 7 (1837), 400-403 (p. 403).

<sup>151</sup> Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, pp. 213-214.



entire want of shamefacedness in the Arab in begging, that he came up to me quietly, after he had received his *douceur* from my *factotum*, to whisper a request for two dollars more. I insinuated he had already received what I thought was proper for him, on which he said, "Well, give me one, only one more dollar, and I will be satisfied." This man's father is Chief of one of the largest tribes in Oman, and he himself a man of much influence and consideration.<sup>152</sup>

Portrayals of the Arab as avaricious and greedy would find space, as we shall see later, in the writing of Bertram Thomas, who exaggerated in describing the greed of the Bedouins of the Empty Quarter, insisting that 'the Badu will unblushingly ask for the moon!' The tale that the Bedouins were rapacious peoples who did not hesitate to eat raw meat or even dead animals is also related by Miles. He writes: 'the Awamir are genuine Bedouins, and no wilder or more predatory race exists, I believe, in Arabia. One of their clans, the Affar are popularly supposed to feed upon the bodies of animals that have died naturally'.<sup>153</sup> Bertram Thomas copies the same picture of these Bedouins and puts this story in his book:

A Badu saw a wayside Arab carrying a small bundle over his shoulder. And the Badu was hungry unto death. Imagining the bundle to contain money or some other valuable, the Badu levelled his rifle and shot the man dead. Rushing up to open the bundle he found not treasure at all but only date-stones, the poor provender intended for the dead man's cow. He was overcome with grief, not, indeed, for having shed innocent blood, but from the remorse of having wasted a perfectly good round of ammunition.<sup>154</sup>

Travel writers who include such peculiar anecdotes in their travelogues deliberately intend not only to attract Western readers, but also to depict the 'other' as a different and weird creation. Thomas, particularly, is concerned with attracting readers, not only by relating strange stories about the Bedouins or the 'semi-barbarous', as he dubs them, but also by using irony in his descriptions, as we have seen previously. His technique of writing is different from either Wellsted or Miles, whose travel accounts are written in

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<sup>152</sup> Miles, 'On the route between Sohar and el-Bereymi in Oman', p. 46.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>154</sup> Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions*, p. 183.

much more simple and clear-cut style. This is why Thomas's literary style is admired by reviewers. A. T. Wilson, for instance, expresses his admiration with these words:

As we read these pages we may see the caravans and hear the tinkle of the bells on the roads beyond the towns, on precipitous mountain tracks and beside the desert edge. We may see the peasants working in the date-groves, the armed men levying tribute from the villages, with as little remorse as the fisherfolk from the sea, the Sultan holding his Court, and the tribes milking their camels.<sup>155</sup>

H. A. R. Gibb asserts that 'style and matter combine to make it one of the most delightful books ever written from Arabian soil'.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> See: 'Preface', in *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia*, p. 14.

<sup>156</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, 'Review: Alarms and Excursions in Arabia', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931-1939)*, 10, no. 4 (1931), p. 567.



## Chapter IV

### Dhufar and the Empty Quarter: The Story of Unknown People and Untrodden Paths

Here in the desert I had found all that I asked; I knew that I should never find it again. [...] I shall always remember how often I was humbled by those illiterate herdsmen who possessed, in so much greater measure than I, generosity and courage, endurance, patience, and lighthearted gallantry. Among no other people have I ever felt the same sense of personal inadequacy.<sup>1</sup>

The ancient Greek and Roman geographers divided the Arabian Peninsula into three parts: Arabia Felix, distinctive for its fertility; Arabia Deserta, for its wilderness; and Arabia Petraea, for its rocky mountains and stony plains.<sup>2</sup> If we apply these divisions to the geography of Oman, Arabia Petraea corresponds to the rugged mountainous Interior, while Arabia Felix to Dhufar, and Arabia Deserta to the Empty Quarter.

Dhufar, indeed, possesses a vital claim to being the ancient Arabia Felix. Its prosperity had been based on frankincense from the time of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. This 'food of Gods', to borrow Nigel Groom's words, has been linked with religious ritual all over the world from time immemorial. In ancient times the Greeks began to use it as an alternative to sacrifice in the sixth century BC, and the Romans from at least the beginning of the second century BC. Beside its usage as a

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<sup>1</sup> Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 1994), pp. 286-287. In the early editions of this book, it was 'inferiority' instead of 'inadequacy'. See, for example, the Penguin edition of 1974, p. 329.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to two famous works, Doughty's *Arabia Deserta* and Thomas's *Arabia Felix*, many travel books were inspired by the Greek and Roman ancient names of Arabia. Some worthy examples include: Henry Rooke, *Travels to the Coast of Arabia Felix* (London: Printed for R. Blamire, 1784); Leon de Laborde, *Journey Through Arabia Petraea, to Mount Sinai, and the Excavated City of Petra, the Edom of the Prophecies* (London: John Murray, 1836); Ludovico di Varthema, *Travels in Egypt, Syria, Arabia Deserta, and Arabia Felix, in Persia, India, and Ethiopia, 1503 to 1508*, trans. by John Winter Jones (London: Hakluyt Society, 1863).

means of winning over the gods, Arabian frankincense was also known from early times as a perfume. It was believed by the Romans to be the incense *par excellence*, and its high price indicated the great demand for it.<sup>3</sup> The Roman geographer Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, devoted a considerable space for the 'country of Frankincense' mentioning 'Sapphar', and 'Omana' which obviously meant Dhofar and Oman. We are told by Pliny that a quantity of Arabian incense was 'burnt by the Emperor Nero at the funeral obsequies of his wife Poppaea'. Pliny was convinced that trade of frankincense rendered the Arabian Peninsula the 'Happy' and the 'Blest', and asserted that the Arabs of southern Arabia were 'the richest nations in the world'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Dhofar was mentioned as 'Saphar' in the oldest book of travel, the *Periplus*. The anonymous author of the book wrote: 'and after nine days more there is Shaphar, the metropolis, in which lives Charibael, lawful king of two tribes, the Homeritae and those living next to them, called the Sabaites'.<sup>5</sup> In its detailed account of southern Arabia, the *Periplus* describes the frankincense of 'Portus Moscha', which the American archaeologist Wendell Philips suggests the port of Sumhuram in Dhofar.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the Greek Arabia Deserta could be applied to the Ruba al-Khali or the Empty Quarter. This huge sand-sea, which covered some 200,000 square miles and consisted of wastes of aeolian sands with enormous dunes rising up 60 meters, became an arena of adventure about which T. E. Lawrence writes, 'every explorer for generations has dreamed of it'.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, Bertram Thomas, John Philiby, and Wilfred

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<sup>3</sup> Nigel Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade* (London: Longman, 1981), pp. 1-21.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. by John Bostock and H. T. Riley, 6 vols (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1855), II, pp. 82-91, and vol. III, pp. 123-137. It is worth mentioning that the original book was written in AD 77.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century*, trans. by Wilfred H. Schoff (London: Longmans, 1912), p. 30, and p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Wendell Philips, *Unknown Oman* (Beirut: Librairie Du Liban, 1971), p. 189.

<sup>7</sup> See *Selected letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p. 329. For more details about the measurements of the Empty Quarter, see G. R. D. King, 'AL-RUB' AL-KHALI', in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. by C. E. Bosworth and others, 8 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), pp. 575-577 (p. 575).



Thesiger were touched by the Empty Quarter through the writings of previous geographers and travellers, and names such as Wellsted, Burton, Miles, Bent and Cox are not infrequently mentioned in their travelogues. In 1835, James Wellsted, from the summit of the Green Mountain in Oman, had an opportunity to get a panoramic view of the 'Desert'.<sup>8</sup> He writes:

Vast plains of loose drift-sand, across which even the hardy Bedowin scarcely dares to venture, spread out as far as the eye can reach. Not a hill nor even a change of colouring in the plains occur, to break the unvarying and desolate appearance of the scene.<sup>9</sup>

Thomas, in his article about Richard Burton, writes that the latter, giving a lecture to the Royal Geographical Society in 1852 about the idea of exploring southeast Arabia, claimed that he had heard from trustworthy sources that Al Rub' al Khali's 'horrid depths swarm with a large and half-starving population; that it abounds in wadys, valleys, gullies and ravines, partially fertilized by intermittent torrents; and therefore that the land is open to the adventurous traveller'.<sup>10</sup> Samuel Miles also, while travelling from Ibri to Dhank in the interior of Oman in 1885, reached the margin of the 'Great Desert' or the Rub al Khali and provided this perspective:

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<sup>8</sup> The Empty Quarter took on different names in the writings of European geographers and travellers. 'Desert', 'Great Desert', 'Rub al Khali' and Arabian Sands' are common in the writings of travellers such as James Wellsted, Samuel Miles, Bertram Thomas and Wilfred Thesiger respectively. However, according to both Thomas and Thesiger, the term 'Rub Al Khali' was familiar only to literate Arabs but unknown to the Bedouins of Southern Arabia, who knew it as 'Ar Rimal', or the 'Sands'. See: Thomas, *Arabia Felix: Across the Empty Quarter of Arabia* (London: Reader's Union, 1938), p. 180, and Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (Dubai: Motivate, 1994), pp. 48-49. On the contrary, John Philby asserts that the Arabs, in general, and the Bedouin tribes, in particular, were 'perfectly familiar with the term'. See: Philby, *The Empty Quarter: Being a Description of the Great South Desert of Arabia Known as Rub' al Khali* (London: Century, 1986), p. 127. More interestingly, the term 'Ar Rub Al Khali' did not exist in classical Arabic sources, and Ali Jawad al-Tahir, one of the contemporary Arab chroniclers and geographers, asserts that the term 'Mafazet Sayhad' or 'Desert of Sayhad' was applied to the area which is known, now, as 'Ar Rub'a Al khli'. See al- Tahir, *Al Mufasssal Fi Tarikh Al Arab Kabil Al Islam* [in Arabic], (Beirut: Dar Al Ilim Lil Malayin, 1970), p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, I, p. 274.

<sup>10</sup> Bertram Thomas, 'Burton and the Rub' al Khali', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, (1931), 966-985 (p. 968).

This wilderness, on the eastern border of which we are now standing, stretches away to the westward for about 700 miles, forming the largest and most inhospitable expanse of sandy waste on the continent of Asia. Broadly speaking, it is devoid of rivers, trees, mountains, and human habitations, unexplored and unexplorable, foodless, waterless, roadless, and shadeless, windswept, and a land of quietude, lethargy, and monotony, perhaps unparalleled in the world. The extent may be best described by saying that it covers an area ten times that of England and Wales.<sup>11</sup>

The Bents in their journey from Muscat to Dhofar in 1894, determined to go by sea, avoiding a 'stretch of desert which the bedouin themselves shrink from, and which is impassable to Europeans.'<sup>12</sup> And Sir Percy Cox, during his 1905 journey between Ibri and Nizwa, decided to explore the Empty Quarter from Adam at the border of the sands, especially when his Bedouin companions agreed to escort him. But Cox claims that the publication of an article by Mr. Bacon suggested that the desert could be crossed by balloon, turned his thoughts in other directions. If he had followed his original plan, he would have been the true pioneer of the Rub al Khali explorers.<sup>13</sup>

Bertram Thomas and Wilfred Thesiger traversed the Empty Quarter in the first half of the twentieth century from Salala in Dhofar. Their works provide us with descriptions of both regions in terms of their nature, people, manners and customs. This chapter is concerned with the discussion of their travelogues.

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<sup>11</sup> Miles, 'On the Border of the Great Desert: A Journey in Oman', part II, p. 415.

<sup>12</sup> Bent, *Southern Arabia*, p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> Cox, 'Some Excursions in Oman' (pp. 214-215).



## 1. Bertram Thomas, 1930

The previous chapter considered Bertram Thomas' life and investigated his journeys in the interior of Oman, while here we are concerned with his travels in Dhufar and the Empty Quarter. His ambition to cross the Empty Quarter had loomed in his mind since he travelled with the Sultan in the northern parts of Oman. Once, he was teased by his companions because he was unmarried, and the Sultan, who knew his 'secretly cherishing desire' to penetrate the Rub al Khali, said to Thomas: '*Insha'allah*, I will help to marry you one of these days to that which is near to your heart', and his private secretary added: 'A virgin indeed'.<sup>14</sup>

Bertram Thomas prepared himself during his work with the Sultan from 1924-1930. Instead of going to India and escaping the hot summer of Oman for his holiday, he used the time in exploration and improving his Arabic. Throughout this period, he gained respect and a reputation of being the Sultan's *wazir* among most of the tribes in Oman. Along with this preparation, he accomplished three camel journeys in the southern parts of Arabia. The first, in 1927-1928, was a camel trek of 650 miles through the southern borderlands of the Empty Quarter from Ras al Had across the Waheeba lands to Dhufar. In the winter of 1929-30 he made a journey of 400 miles due north from Dhufar to Mugshen at the edge of the sands and out again. On October 1930 Thomas felt himself all set for the biggest and most dangerous journey of all. He sailed, quietly, from Muscat to Dhufar, bearing in his mind the secret dream of crossing the Empty Quarter. On board the British *Grenadier*, the pilot left a token for Thomas who, opening it, discovered that it was Walter de la Mare's poem 'Arabia'.<sup>15</sup> Thomas stayed

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<sup>14</sup> See: Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions*, p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas uses this poem as an epigraph to his book *Arabia Felix*. J. B. Kelly argues that de la Mare's poem, especially this verse: 'He is crazed with the spell of far Arabia, They have stolen his wits away.', became a cliché in English literature on Arabia. See J. B. Kelly, 'A Saga of the Sands', *The New Republic*, 192 (1985), 40-42 (p. 40).

in Dhufar till December exploring the Qara Mountain and its plains. He provided information about the people of Dhofar, their conventions, creeds and manners. He then had to face some obstacles in crossing the Rub al Khali. The main one was finding a caravan able and willing to carry him. The other two main obstacles to such an adventure, the traditional official attitude and insecurity about raiders or 'treachery', could be met by any stranger. His previous experience had taught him, however, that his plans could be accomplished only through the means of a Rashidi caravan. In order to undertake this penetration, Thomas familiarised himself with the desert life: he grew a beard, dressed in Arab clothes, abstained from alcohol, and lived as one of the 'Badus'.<sup>16</sup>

On 10 December 1930, Thomas and his caravan of fifteen camels marched north out of Dhufar across the coastal plain and through the green foothills of the Qara Mountains, passing through valleys of frankincense groves and so on by way of Wadi Dauka across the mild plain to the waterhole of Shisur, six days' march to the north. From Shisur westwards the party marched to the southern edge of the sands, which Thomas found completely waterless and with scarce meadows. There he collected specimens of oyster and other fossils, which he believed belonged to the Middle Eocene limestone.

In the borderland between plain and sands his companions pointed out to him antique caravan paths, which they called the Road to Ubar, an ancient city that, according to their myths, was hidden under the sands. Thomas writes that on his previous journeys he had heard from other Arabs about this 'Atlantis of the Sands', but none could tell him of even an estimate of its location. One of his companions, Ma'yuf told him that as a child he had, while grazing in the sands of Shu'ait, found a large

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<sup>16</sup> Both Bertram Thomas and Wilfred Thesiger prefer to use 'Bedu' or 'Badu' according to the Arabic pronunciation instead of the English word, Bedouin. However, I will use the English word, to avoid confusion, whenever the writing is mine, and I will keep the word as it is cited in their texts.



circular block of stone and many coloured potsherds. Although Thomas did not investigate the tracks he saw, he felt that it was quite possible that they were part of a trade route running from the frankincense country to Gerrha on the Persian Gulf or to Petra of the Nabathaeans in Sinai, and the location of Ubar in the sands of Shu'ait would be reasonable.<sup>17</sup>

Moving north-westwards, the party left the borderland sands of Shu'ait and entered the Uruq Dhahiya, a huge extent of sand dunes where no other animals but a camel could cross and definitely no motor car, Thomas claims. A nine hours' march on Christmas Day took them to Khor Dhahiya. Their camels were completely exhausted, so they decided to spend a night in that waterhole. However, Khor Dhahiya was an unsafe area, for the raiders from the steppe knew it very well and could attack them. The next day, they left. The day after, Thomas was introduced to Sheik Hamad bin Hadi of the Murra Tribe, who was to be his next guide, after Shaikh Salih bin Klut, his previous Rasidi guide. The party was now reduced to twenty, and they crossed westwards through the sands of Dakaka.

Their next destination was to be Shanna, a deep waterhole in western Dakaka. They purposely marched slowly, for the area was rich in pastures and waterholes, and Thomas now found more opportunity for natural history collecting and photography after the previous hungry and barren wastes. He brought with him a prismatic compass, aneroids and a hydrometer, sextant, artificial horizon and chronometers, surgical

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<sup>17</sup> Ubar or Wabar is believed by travellers and archaeologists to be Iram, the lost wealthy city which has been described in the Koran as the city that was 'adorned with pillars, Whose like has not been reared in lands'. Of Iram, like Sodom and Ghomorra, it is said that God destroyed it because of the sins of its people. Ubar is, legendarily, believed to be buried beneath the sands of Southern Arabia, and many explorers such as Bertram Thomas, Wilfred Thesiger and Wendell Phillips professed to believe the lost city might be found in Southern Oman. In 1991, the American film-maker Nicholas Clapp organised two expeditions to Oman with a team, including archaeologists, geologists, space scientists and some adventurers. They examined towers at Shisur, north of Dhufar, and found evidence that the settlement dated back to 400 B. C. Their further excavations showed that Ubar was located at Shisur. For the full story of this exploration see: Nicholas Clapp, *The Road to Ubar: Finding the Atlantis of the Sands* (London: Souvenir Press, 1999). On the same subject, see also Ranulph Fiennes, *Atlantis of the Sands: the Search of the lost city of Ubar* (London: Signet Book, 1993).

instruments for skinning, killing and preserving bottles, a Winchester rifle and a butterfly net, cranial callipers, and two cameras, and collected specimens of water, sand, fossils and animals. After a week, the party reached Shanna, where Thomas estimated his final destination, Doha, to be 330 miles on a bearing somewhat east of north. There, the party was reduced again to thirteen men, thirteen fast camels and five pack camels that carried rations for twenty-five days.

They left Shanna in January for the northward run. The area was described as 'hunger-stricken' waste, and the small party had to take long marches all the day without halting except for camel grazing or for prayers. Going northwards out of Dakaka they came into Suwahib, where Thomas, for the first time, met a little habitation of camel-hair tents and small herds of camels, which belonged to the Murra tribe. He was permitted to descend here and talk to the kinsfolk of his Murra guide. Leaving Suwahib, they entered Mazariq, where Thomas collected two eagle's eggs from a nest, in addition to the five hundred and ninety specimens of reptiles and insects he collected during this expedition; all these specimens were taken to the Natural History Museum in London.<sup>18</sup>

Now their route through Dakaka and Suwahib turned to the northeast, to avoid the fanatical *Wahhabis* who lived in the north. During this trip Thomas depended on camel's milk, giving up the brackish water of the desert which was often of the 'colour of beer and tasted strongly of sulphur', as he said. But later, when they reached the sands of Sanam, the habitat of Murra tribe, they found the water sweet. On the sunset of 20 January, Thomas's companions saw the first crescent moon of Ramadan and greeted

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<sup>18</sup> One has the right to raise a question about the ethics or the morality of such actions. Thomas and Thesiger brought back home many specimens of flora, fauna and historical monuments. Some critics have considered these collections as 'stolen', 'looted' and 'plundered' on the grounds that they were taken without permission and without any intention of returning them. See: Robin Skeates, *Debating the Archaeological Heritage* (London: Duckworth, 2000), p. 39. Likewise, Peter Raby argues that some European travellers were 'plant-hunters' and regarded the rest of the world as 'an extended farm' bringing back to England most of the valuable species of transplant. See: Peter Raby, *Right Paradise: Victorian Scientific Travellers* (London: Pimlico, 1996), p. 124.



it with rifle fire and with prayer; after that they fasted throughout the daytimes of the journey, although as travellers in those difficult areas they had the excuse to break or suspend fasting. During this march from Sanam they encountered sever sandstorms and intense cold. They were sitting round the camp-fire when swiftly the flames swept and the wind blew from everywhere. They all covered their faces with their hands to save their eyes from the smoke. But the storm grew more brutal; Thomas writes that when his face was exposed, 'the gritty blast struck it with the sharpness of a knife'. The 'hissing' of the sandy wind, the clattering of the camp cordage and the extreme cold made their sleep impossible. In the morning, Thomas found that the sand had damaged his small cinema camera and affected the readings on his aneroids.

As they pushed northwards, they reached the stone-lined well of Banaiyan, where there were many pastures for the camels and where the wind, if it blew again, would be harmless. Banaiyan marked the beginning of the final phase of their expedition, after the eighteen days' dash across the main sands of the Empty Quarter, and Thomas was happy that 'the great central wastes of Rub' al Khali lay behind me, the sea was but eighty miles to the northward, success was in sight'.

However, their march now brought them a different kind of risk, since they were passing through the territories of the Wahhabis. These bigoted men did not hesitate to kill either the infidels or the 'heretics' in Islam, by whom they meant every Muslim not sharing their 'narrow views', according to Thomas. Fortunately, it was Ramadan and they had withdrawn to their home regions. The party proceeded over rigid, gravelly steppe land, broken with white salt plains and hills of sand. J-Iamad, who had guided them well previously, here gave way to Talib, an Arab from the northern Murra tribe, who lacked knowledge of his country; his frequent promises of firewood and pastures just over each hilltop did not appear — mistakes, Thomas remarked, that could have cost them their lives in the heat of the summer.

The beginning of February brought the journey nearly to its end. Thomas, with some of his companions, climbed up the steep softness of a hill named Nakhala. There, they could see behind them the 'vast, almost uninhabited wastes of the Rub' al Khali' they had just crossed. At dawn, they moved on again, and gradually signs of civilization appeared. 'The last sandhill was left behind' Thomas remarks. Half an hour later they saw the towers of Doha and entered the walls of the fort. Finally, the journey was over, and the 'virgin' Empty Quarter had been penetrated.

Thomas sent a telegram, dated Bahrein, 22, February, 4.30 p.m, to The Royal Geographical Society, informing them of his crossing of the Empty Quarter. It was read to the Evening Meeting, and a message of congratulations was sent to him that afternoon by the President and the Council.<sup>19</sup> Next day *The Times* announced that they had received another telegram from Thomas, and for the event they published an article by Mr. Kenneth Williams celebrating 'the significance of the adventure'.<sup>20</sup> Thomas became, now, the first European to cross the mysterious sands of the Empty Quarter. His achievement was honoured by scientific associations, and praised by scholars and well known travellers in Arabia. He won the Founder's Medal granted by the Royal Geographical Society in 1931; 'It was an exploration which many geographers would have been only too anxious to undertake had it been possible', said Colonel Sir Charles Close, the president of the Society at that time.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, T. E. Lawrence, one of

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<sup>19</sup> See: Anon, 'The First Crossing of the Rub' Al Khali', *The Geographical Journal*, 77 (1931), 360-361 (p.361).

<sup>20</sup> See: Kenneth Williams, 'The Riddle of Arabia, Southern Desert Crossed, Mr. Bertram Thomas's Success', *The Times* (Feb 23, 1931), p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Sir Charles said this when he introduced Bertram Thomas to an audience gathered to hear Thomas's paper about crossing the Rub al Khali. See: Bertram Thomas, 'A Journey into Rub' Al Khali—The Southern Arabian Desert: A paper read at the Evening Meeting of the Society on 2 June 1930', *The Geographical Journal*, 77, no. 1 (1931), 1-37 (p. 32). In addition to the Society, other learned institutions granted Thomas different awards including the Burton Memorial Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society, the Livingstone Medal of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society of Antwerp, the Cullum Gold Medal of the American Geographical Society, an Hon. D. Litt. from Bristol University, and an Hon. D. Sc from Acadia University, Nova Scotia. See: Brian Marshall, 'Bertram Thomas and the Crossing of Al-Rub' Al-Khali', *Arabian Studies*, 7 (1985), 139-150 (p. 150).



most famous travellers in Arabia, admired this exploration and expressed 'All honour to Thomas'. He says in his Foreword to Thomas's *Arabia Felix*:

Few men are able to close an epoch. 'We cannot know the first man who walked the inviolate earth for newness' sake: but Thomas is the last; and he did his journey in the antique way, by pain of his camel's legs, single-handed, at his own time and cost. He might have flown an aeroplane, sat in a car or rolled over in a tank. Instead he has snatched, at the twenty-third hour, feet's last victory and set us free. [...] no faint judgment, set against what I think the finest thing in Arabian exploration.<sup>22</sup>

Lawrence maybe was not exaggerating when he considered Thomas's achievement as the 'finest thing in Arabian exploration', because it was a pioneering venture.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas's competitor, Harry St. John Philby who had been working for more than ten years to be the first European to penetrate the Rub al Khali, congratulated his colleague and regarded his success as an 'exploit'.<sup>24</sup> However, in spite of Philby's 'sportsmanlike congratulations', as Peter Brent points out, Thomas's accomplishment must have looked like an assault upon his soul.<sup>25</sup> His reaction to the news, before he set out, of Thomas's crossing of the Rub al Khali, speaks much of his frustration: 'I knew the full bitterness of my own disappointment. He had won the race, and it only remained for me to finish the course', he wrote later.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, pp. viii-ix.

<sup>23</sup> T. E Lawrence, in his letter to Sir Hugh Trenchard the Marshal of the R.A.F, has suggested that the Empty Quarter could be crossed only by an 'airship': 'it will mark an era in exploration. It will finish our knowledge of the earth. Nothing but an airship can do it, and I want it to be one of ours which gets the plum'. See: *Selected Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, Eds. by David Garnett (London: World Books, 1941), pp. 311-312.

<sup>24</sup> See: Philby's biography of Thomas in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by L. G. W. Legg and E. G. Williams (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 874-875 (p.875).

<sup>25</sup> Peter Brent, *Far Arabia: Explorers of the Myth* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p. 208.

<sup>26</sup> Philby, *The Empty Quarter*, p. xvi. It is worth mentioning here that Bertram Thomas was luckier than John Philby in winning the 'race' of crossing the Empty Quarter, for the former set out secretly and under no auspices, while the later was held up by King Abdul Aziz ibn Sa'ud, the King of Sudia Arabia, who did not permit him to travel until January 7, 1932.

It seems that the primary motive of Thomas's journey in the Rub al Khali was the desire to be the first European to cross this 'uninhabited' desert. All the challenges and obstacles of the desert mentioned by previous travellers made Thomas and Philby rival each other to make the first penetration of the Rub al Khali, but Thomas won the race. Along the way, other reasons for Thomas's journey included drawing a map of that unknown desert, investigating the customs and manners of the 'unknown peoples of Southern Arabia', taking anthropological measurements and collecting specimens for some British museums and learned societies. However, Muhammad Morsy Abdullah has identified another objective for Thomas's travels in the interior of Oman and the Empty Quarter. He relies on the letters of Alexander Sloan, the US Consul in Baghdad, who considered all British activities in Arabia as linked with oil. According to Abdullah, Sloan believed that Bertram Thomas's travels in Oman were observed 'benevolently' by the British Government. And in one of his reports to his government, Sloan wrote:

British officials stationed in the Persian Gulf were well aware of the fact that Mr Thomas had not been sent to act as financial adviser to the Sultan of 'Oman solely, but that his main duties there were to explore the interior and to try and locate for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company oil seepages reported to have been discovered by Arab caravans in that section of Arabia.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, this claim is weak because Thomas undertook his journey to the Empty Quarter secretly without seeking permission from British officials: 'I should say at the outset that I travelled under no Government auspices—in fact, no auspices but my own', he declares.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, in all his writing of his journeys in Oman, Thomas did not mention any oil seepage, though he stated the names of many water holes and places. At

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<sup>27</sup> Muhammad Morsy Abdullah, *The United Arab Emirates: A Modern History* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> Bertram Thomas, 'Among Some Unknown Tribes of South Arabia', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 59 (1929), 97-111 (P.97). Elsewhere, he also insists, 'Both these journeys were undertaken on my own initiative and not under any official auspices'. See: Bertram Thomas, 'A Camel Journey Across the Rub' Al Khali', *The Geographical Journal*, 78, 3 (1931), 209-242 (p. 209).



this point, Brian Marshall argues that Sloan's story lacks evidence, and Thomas's love of exploration with his anthropological interests 'were the primary motivating factors behind his travels'.<sup>29</sup>

Thomas first published his travel accounts through Dhofar and the Empty Quarter in different journals such as: *The Geographical Journal*, *The Near East and India*, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* and *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*. Later on he compiled the whole narrative in his book *Arabia Felix: Across the Empty Quarter of Arabia*, which came out in two editions 1932 and 1938.<sup>30</sup>

As he did in his travels through the northern parts of Oman, Thomas provides us with meticulous observations on the customs and manners of the inhabitants of the southern area. He also describes the mountains of Dhofar and the sands of the Empty Quarter, paying much attention to some particular places and strange phenomena. In Dhofar, Thomas observed two ethnic inhabitants, 'Negroes' and 'tribal people'. He found the former to comprise a self-contained community and to be the biggest single element in the population of Salala, the capital of Dhofar. He believes that Black slaves enjoyed a 'contented mind' with a happy character often absent in their masters, so that they sang and danced heedless of their political and social inabilities.<sup>31</sup> In this regard, he depicts some scenes of their particular folk customs, such as Bathing Chorus and Devil Dancing. He describes the first dance:

Soon through the prison courtyard below came twenty young negresses, dancing a sensuous measure, their heads poised in snake-like detachment balancing full water pitchers. Here was the Bathing Chorus, a recognised institution when the Sultan or I was in residence, and the tank in the bathroom must needs be replenished daily. As they filed past the doorway of my room they ceased to sing; a young one, confident in her

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<sup>29</sup> Marshall, 'Bertram Thomas and the Crossing of Al-Rub' Al-Khali', 139-150 (p. 144).

<sup>30</sup> All these travel accounts are listed in the bibliography of this study.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 31.

youth and greatly daring, risks what may be almost a wink in my direction, for in their world of Dhufar, they were none of them better than they should be. On filing out each halts to turn and make obeisance.<sup>32</sup>

Thomas also found the slaves had a peculiar belief that when any of them died and was buried an evil came in to assault him (in contrast to the local belief that two Muslim angels would come to share his grave), and therefore the drums and the devil-dancer were called up to repel the torturer. He provides a picture of a mourning ceremony that was performed, under the coconut palms, three days after a death:

A dozen paces within the ring was the path of the main performers — a stream of young negroes and negresses, who came sweeping round and round the circle in grand parade— young slave girls, singly or in pairs, sturdy, black as ebony, and high of bosom, selected doubtless for their superior graces in the eyes of men. A black muslin veil shrouded each girl's head and drooped about the shoulders, of so flimsy a material that it did not conceal, but rather accentuated the effect of her flashing eyes, her thick scarlet-painted lips, her nose-ring, ear-rings and necklaces of gold. Her dress, new doubtless for the occasion, was a single mantle of starched indigo that glistened in the sun. One end of its long sweeping train she held up fastidiously between finger and thumb, the arm outstretched level with her shoulder, the other arm lay close to her side with the hand poised a span or so from the hip and palm turned back at almost right angles to the wrist. And thus she moves; her head motionless, her face turning neither to right nor left, her body moving by some subtle shuffle-step that has the sinuous slide of a skater. Before her leaps an eager youth, in his hand a drawn sword that quivers with a flick of the wrist; now on this side, now on that, now turning about to face her — spellbound he seems, like the moth to the candle. Other male slaves, threes and fours in line, rifles held above their heads, stalk round in the more deliberate measure of the horse-dance and looking straight to their front regardless of beauty.<sup>33</sup>

Thomas's observations about slaves of Dhofar and their customs led him to talk about the slaves' status in Oman asserting what was remarked on by previous travellers such as John Ovington (1693), Alexander Hamilton (1715), John Malcolm (1800), William Heude (1816), John Johnson (1817), Robert Mignan (1820), George Keppel (1824), Robert Binning (1850) and William Gifford Palgrave (1863).<sup>34</sup> In agreement

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pp. 33-35.

<sup>34</sup> All these travellers testified to the 'kindness' and 'generosity' evident in the treatment that slaves received in Oman. Their observations focused on the mercy and respect shown by masters to their slaves;



with them, Thomas asserts that it was hard for any European who had not lived in the Muslim world to understand the complexities of slavery. The situation of the slave, he argues, should be put side by side with that of the 'freeman' in the same area, and thus the life of the slave in Oman was not 'wholly pitiable'. The general standard of life in Oman, Thomas claims, was so low that the masters had to feed and clothe their slaves nearly as well as themselves. The basic difference between them, he continues, laid in work. It was the slave who had to do the manual labour, and the freeman was to observe his work. However, Thomas maintains, to believe that the difference between master and slave was as harshly distinguished as in the southern states of the U.S.A. or the West Indian colonies before the abolition 'would be a false assumption'.<sup>35</sup>

Another ethnic group that Thomas observed in Dhofar were the 'tribal people' who occupied mainly the Qara Mountains and spread covered the southern area of Oman. His remarks about them cover their origins, customs and manners. He raises a problem about the origins of South Arabians, 'the Dhufar bloc'. Indeed, he was convinced that they were non-Arabs:

The language, culture, and physiognomy of these mountain people of South Arabia mark them off very distinctly from the northern Arab. Indeed, if the hawk-nosed, long-headed Semitic type of northern Arabia is regarded as the true Arab type, I feel that the inhabitants of the south, not merely of the Dhufar mountains, but tribes to east and west, represent certain definite non-Arab survivals. I have already on a previous occasion suggested reasons for believing that these tribes had in part an African origin or else that the Southern Arabian and some of the north-east African tribes sprang from a common origin.<sup>36</sup>

The reasons that Thomas gives for his view were manifold. He supports his idea with writings by other scholars and travellers such as Ibn Battuta and Richard Burton,

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a kind of treatment which Heude sums up with these words: 'They live at their master's, board and sleep under his roof, eating of his dish, and drinking of his cup'. For details, see chapter II of this study.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> Bertram Thomas, 'A Camel Journey Across the Rub' Al Khali', *The Geographical Journal*, 78, no. 3 (1931), 209-242 (p. 212).

especially the former (who visited Dhofar in September 1331 and claimed, as Thomas quotes, 'The outlying population is not Arab, but of a Sudanic type').<sup>37</sup> He relies also on his anthropological observations, as he had made around forty-five head measurements and took full-face and profile portraits of random samples from the inhabitants of Dhufar. He describes a man from the Qara Mountain:

He was a typical man of these mountains, short of stature, dark of skin, with long gollywog curly hair, almost beardless, with features that distinguished him immediately from the northern Arab, broad brow, very small ears, nose that was not armenoid, small, round black eyes again not armenoid, a pointed receding chin, shallow square jaws under the ears; well-developed and clean legs, but poor body and arms.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, he found them to speak four separate dialects which were not understood by Arabs, he claims, and had closer affinities with Ethiopian than with Arabic. He was led to this conclusion by the archaeological remains he encountered through his journeys over the Qara Mountain. At Ba Musgaiyif he saw a cemetery: 'this was a crude ground monument sometimes bearing pre-Arabic, possibly early Ethiopic inscriptions, thereby suggesting that the central south tribes speaking tongues having Ethiopic affinities may be of considerable local antiquity'.<sup>39</sup> In general, Thomas was convinced that the 'non-Arabic speaking tribes' in Southern Oman were very different from the Northern Semitic Arabs in almost every respect. For him, the fuzzy hair and dark brown skin of these tribes along with their physiognomy and round-headed skulls gave them Hamitic or Abyssinian-like affinities. However, Thomas's thesis was challenged by Professor Charles Gabriel Seligman, a well-known British anthropologist, when the former

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<sup>37</sup> See: Bertram Thomas, 'Anthropological Observations in South Arabia', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 62, no. 35 (1932), 83-95 (p. 93). It must be mentioned here that Thomas does not give the full reference of this claim. However, I consulted both the Arabic source and the English translation of Ibn Battuta's *Travels* but found no hint of what Thomas quoted. By contrast, Ibn Battuta states that the people of Dhufar 'resemble the people of the Maghrib', and that both peoples 'originate from Himyar', the pre-Islamic Arab tribe. See *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, trans. by H. A. R. Gibb, 2 vols (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1986), II, p. 385.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 126.



delivered his lecture to the Royal Anthropological Institute, published in its Journal in 1932. Seligman, in the discussion following the lecture, comments:

If we endeavour to sum up the information presented by the measurements and photographs brought back by Mr. Thomas, we can only say that (omitting a small number of unusual types) there is no very outstanding difference between the Arabic and non-Arabic-speaking groups, and both are predominantly Armenoid. This, as I pointed out in 1917, is the race to which the Arabs of South-Western Arabia belong. I cannot see that there is any reason to regard Mr. Thomas's subjects as Hamitic, nor have I been able to trace resemblances to such Abyssinian photographs as are at my disposal.<sup>40</sup>

Elsewhere, Seligman argues that though the people of Southern Oman spoke non-Arabic accents of Semitic, physically they did not differ very much from the natives of Yemen, and thus they were in fact Southern Arabs.<sup>41</sup>

Besides noting the peculiarity of the inhabitants of Dhufar in terms of their external features and their dialects, Thomas paid attention to some of their customs. Regarding their dress, he describes the men who wore a single indigo skirt wound round to the knees and then brought obliquely across their bodies and thrown over one shoulder, with a leather girdle around the waist. Their heads were bare as their arms and legs, and most of them wore a particular earring in the right ear and a single armlet above the right elbow.<sup>42</sup> As regards the women, he found them wearing a single baggy black robe, low in the neck and reaching to the ground, with a black muslin head-wrap that fell about shoulders and neck, and they were generally unveiled. He also found both sexes using indigo for painting their bodies and dying their clothes. But women, he maintains, decorated their faces also with black smears over the eyebrows, round the nostrils and a direct line to ears from nostrils, around the border of the chin, black

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<sup>40</sup> See: Thomas, 'Anthropological Observations in South Arabia', p. 95.

<sup>41</sup> See Seligman's discussion of Thomas's paper 'A Journey into Rub' Al Khali—The Southern Arabian Desert', *The Geographical Journal*, 77, no. 1 (1931), 1-37 (pp.34-35).

<sup>42</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p.54.

stripes around the throat, red lips, and green eye ashes. Young girls of these tribes, Thomas adds, wore a nose-ring in the left nostril. The rim of their ears, pierced in childhood at the same distances in six or seven places, were ornamented all round with large silver earrings.<sup>43</sup>

Thomas also gives us a picture of the hairstyles of the inhabitants of Dhufar. He believes that the people's hair traditions seemed to be related to their 'sexual life'. A striking aspect, for Thomas, was the middle lock worn by boys at circumcision, which looked like a 'policeman's helmet', or the 'Hindu caste'. Not less odd were the hair conventions of the women, Thomas argues. The Qara girls of Dhufar had a custom of having a half-inch band of hair with its attached flesh shaved through the centre of the head in which the hair never grew again; Thomas notes that sometimes the process had mortal consequences. Cutting off the hair around the forehead to expose a great extent of brow was another rite of female beauty, Thomas observes. Men, he adds, either shaved or trimmed their moustaches, but they never cut off their chin-tuft, as it would have been shameful to shave it, 'for by it a man swears'. Their head hair, however, was left to grow naturally long and curly, and it was sometimes pulled up and tied in a bun on top, showing a greasy look from much treatment with coconut oil.<sup>44</sup>

Thomas was struck by the circumcision rites of these tribes. Unlike the system of northern parts of Oman, Thomas found the males circumcised on puberty and the females on the day of their birthday. In both regions, however, with the male the entire foreskin was cut away. As regards the females, while the Arabs of Northern Oman only cut off the top of the clitoris, the tribes of Dhufar incised the whole part.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp. 73-74.

<sup>44</sup> See: Bertram Thomas, 'Among Some Unknown Tribes of South Arabia', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 59, no. 32 (1929), 97-111 (p. 101), and *Arabia Felix*, pp. 72-73.





Figure 6- Anthropological examples of Dhofari men studied by Thomas in 1930/1932.



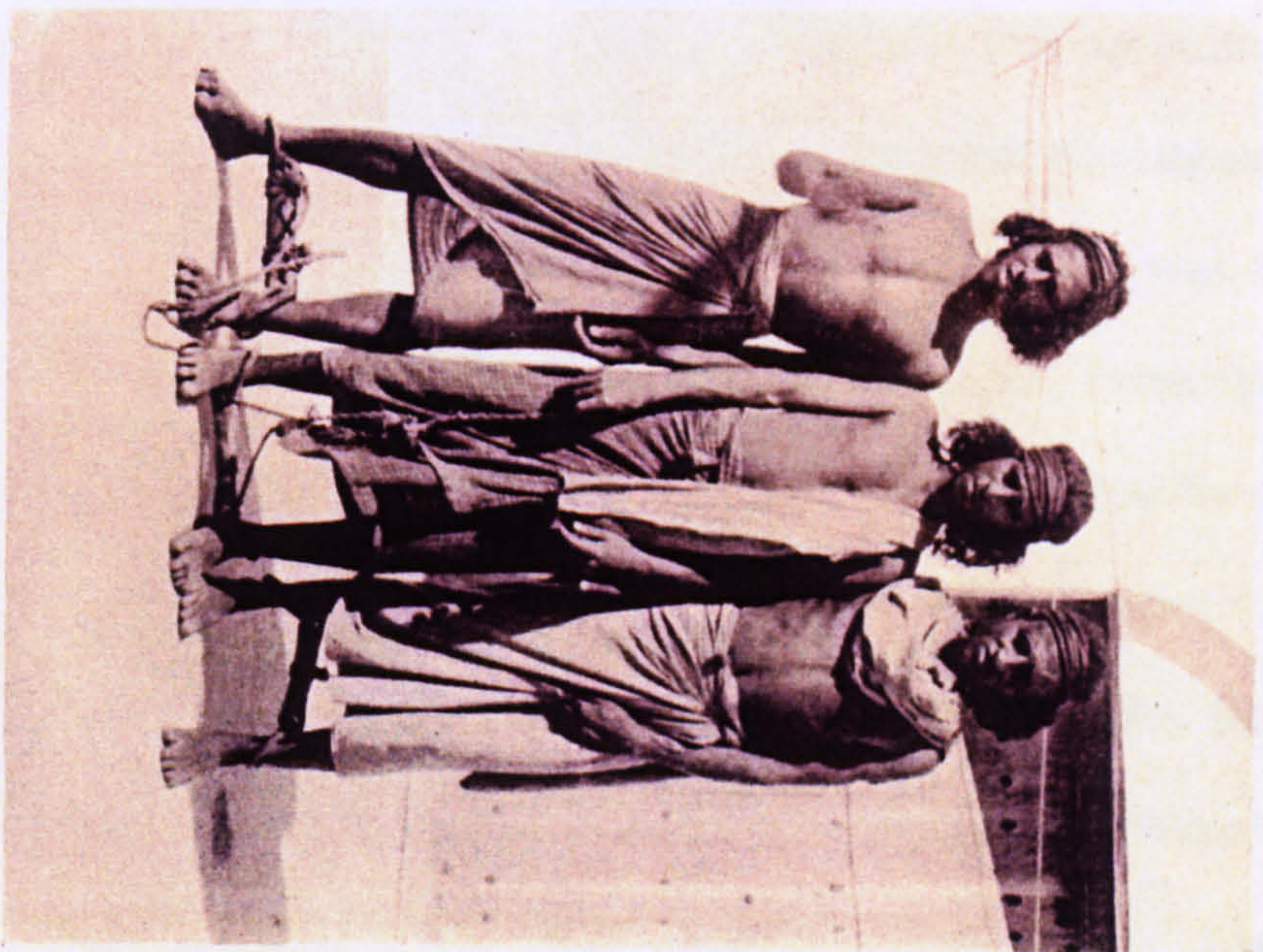


Figure 7 - Natives of the Qara Mountain in Dhofar pictured by Thomas 1930/32



Circumcision rites were usually performed throughout Oman with celebrations, and Thomas attended one of the ceremonies in Dhufar:

Large numbers of men and women assemble round a large open space. On a rock in the centre sits the boy of fifteen, a sword in hand. This sword, which has been blunted for the occasion, he throws into the air to catch it again in its descent, his palm clasp the naked blade. Before him sits the circumciser, an old man; behind him stands an unveiled virgin, usually a cousin or a sister, also sword in hand.

She raises and lowers her sword vertically, and at the bottom of the stroke strikes it quivering with the palm of her left hand. The stage is now set. The boy sits, his left hand outstretched palm upwards, in suppliant manner, waiting for the actual operation. This done, he has promptly to rise bleeding and run round the assembly raising and lowering his sword as if oblivious of pain, and by his performance his manliness will be judged. The rite is attended by brave songs and drumming and the firing of rifles, the women opening their upper garments as a gesture of baring their breasts. But no such manifestations of joy, indeed no manifestations at all, accompany the clitoridectomy of the infant female, which is done in secret.<sup>45</sup>

Other peculiar customs that Thomas paid attention to, in Dhufar, concerned greetings and women. He found the men's salutations strange, as they greeted each other on meeting with a mutual kiss on the left cheek, the right arm of each resting on the other's left shoulder. But they were so rude, he believes, that they habitually did not bother to get up for each other if one party was sitting—'unthinkable boorishness judged by Arabian standard'. Hand shaking, which he saw throughout Arabia, was, here, set aside for the women, and became, in the case of saluting a man, only a smart tap of the fingers, the lady moving back her hand quickly, because, Thomas claims, for a man to press a girl's hand, or grasp it as in Europe, was considered to be improper, for which family relations might become worse.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, Thomas believes that the women in Dhufar had more freedom than those in the North as he found them allowed to sing, an act for which women, elsewhere in Oman, would be beaten as a 'hussy'. Despite the liberty they enjoyed, he adds, illegitimacy was almost unheard of. However, if there was transgression for a girl it would be considered differently than elsewhere in Arabia. In

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 75-76.

the Northern parts of Oman a single woman, or a wife committing fornication, would be killed by her father or brother, and nothing would be done to the man who had tempted her. But in Dhufar, Thomas notes, the girl would be dismissed from the tribe and had to maintain herself, and her family or relatives would seek retaliation on some female relation of the enticer if they could not murder him.<sup>47</sup> Thomas also observed the peculiarity of woman's customs at Dhufar in terms of work. He found women not allowed to milk animals or cook the food, as these jobs were 'men's prerogatives'. Her job, he claims, was restricted to grazing and tending cattle, collecting firewood and water, making pottery and mainly bearing children.<sup>48</sup>

The subject that absorbed Thomas's greatest attention in Dhufar was the superstitions held by its people. He writes much about their beliefs in exorcism, spirits, jinns and sacrifices. Although they were Muslims, he found them 'full of pagan cults'. In the Wadi Rizat he was struck by leftovers of food and tobacco lying at the bottom of the spring. There he saw the natives coming out at night to throw fragments of food on the ground or into the spring shouting, 'We are your sons and your daughters—don't harm us. Be awake so that we are not harmed by evil men or malign spirits'. This custom, Thomas tells us, was known to the locals as 'Nughush' which they believed would propitiate the evils that visited the departed spirits.<sup>49</sup> Blood sacrifice was practiced in the mountains of Dhufar in order to propitiate evils. It was the sacred rule, Thomas claims, that one-half of a man's cows should be slaughtered as a sacrifice for the state of his soul, after his death.<sup>50</sup> He found them also frightened by the 'Evil Eye', not only for themselves, but also similarly for their crops and herds, and the cure was

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas, 'Anthropological Observations in South Arabia', p. 91.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 98.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> For detailed descriptions of this custom see *Arabia Felix*, pp. 55-56.



mainly achieved by burning frankincense and practicing blood sacrifice. At Jurbaib he saw people slaughtering cows before the harvest, draining their blood into the springs and casting scraps of flesh throughout the fields.<sup>51</sup> The failure of milk in their animals, he adds, was always attributed to the Evil Eye, and the treatment was exorcism by frankincense rite. He provides a picture of this rite, which was usually carried out at sunrise or at sunset:

The incense burner was brought and wood introduced and lighted. The practitioner, the cow-owner, broke a fragment of frankincense about the size of a walnut into three pieces. Then spitting upon it three times he introduced it into the burner. While two other witnesses held the afflicted animal by head and leg respectively, he waved about its head the burning frankincense, chanting a set sacrificial chant.<sup>52</sup>

He also notices that in Dhufar when a man made a house the first thing he did on consolidating it was to hammer four long nails into the corners to protect it from the Evil Eye, and when the house was done he killed a lamb on the entrance as a sacrifice to make his walls last.<sup>53</sup>

Another peculiarity of these people, Thomas writes, was their strong belief in oaths upon shrines and the 'ordeal by fire', in which swearing on the Koran or in the name of Allah, as practiced all over Arabia, was nothing to them and the offender was judged, instead, by swearing on a holy shrine or by 'ordeal'. Thomas asserts that frequently the suspected one would own up rather than face the results of his false oath, as powers of punishment were ascribed to shrines in Dhufar. But swearing on a shrine, he adds, was not at all times satisfactory, and the accused murderer might be prompted to submit himself to the 'ordeal by fire'. He depicts this rite:

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.42.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas, 'Anthropological Observations in South Arabia', p. 88.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, pp. 94-95.

The ceremony takes place between the dawn and noon prayers. The parties assemble before the fire. The inquisitor inserts a knife blade into the fire, and after some time has elapsed the accused opens his mouth and puts his tongue out. The inquisitor then takes the tip of the accused man's tongue in his kerchief between finger and thumb with one hand; with the other he withdraws the red-hot blade, holds it to his own lips in benediction and then gives two smart raps, first with one flat side, then the other, laterally across the outstretched tongue. The accused should be able to spit at once if the portents are propitious, but two hours are allowed to elapse before the tongue is examined. If there are signs of swelling or undue burning, or gland affection in the neck, he is declared guilty and must pay with his life or as his accusers may require, but if there be none of these symptoms, he is adjudged innocent.<sup>54</sup>

All these details led Thomas to doubt the Arabic origins of the tribes of Dhufar: 'I have never met animistic cults amongst Northern Arabs, who profess contempt for such practices, if indeed they do not dub them ungodly'.<sup>55</sup>

Beside this picture of the peculiar customs of the people of Dhufar, he gives a negative image of their manners, representing them as liars and thieves:

They are expert, incorrigible thieves, brother steals from brother, father from son, and a boy that shows no aptitude is suspect — his manliness is despaired of. For the intended victim to report to government a thief caught in the act would be treachery. If the victim catches the robber then they compact a double requital. Judicial disputes may be brought to government, but never a petty theft; this in contrast with the Badawin, to whom petty larceny is abominable. Yet an open raid upon camels is no reproach, not being sneaking theft, but act of war, by men prepared to deal death and to suffer it.<sup>56</sup>

Elsewhere, he states that 'the mass of these tribesmen are a dour breed, sly, suspicious, unamiable'.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Thomas sums up his attitude toward the people of Dhufar in the title of the second chapter of his *Arabia Felix* 'At Dhufar: Anarchy, Treachery and Hospitality'.

However, if Thomas was unhappy with the 'anarchy' and 'treachery' of the people of Dhufar he was delighted by the beauty of its nature: 'what a glorious place!

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, pp. 84-86.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas, 'Anthropological Observations in South Arabia', p. 90.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 42.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.66.



Mountains three thousand feet high basking above a tropical ocean, their seaward slopes velvety with waving jungle, their roofs fragrant with rolling yellow meadows, beyond which the mountains slope northwards to a red sandstone steppe'.<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere, he comments on the pleasure he got from his journeys over the Qara Mountain:

But, in spite of recent sinister events the thought of going was an unhappy one, for I was leaving what surely must be a unique land in all Arabia, a land of perpetual feasts for the artist, of endless surprises for the anthropologist, a naturalist's paradise, and to me, the wayfarer, a source of much interest and delight.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, Thomas in his discussion of the term 'Arabia Felix' considers Dhufar to be the only land, after Yemen, that could deserve this epithet. His image about it as the biblical Ophir is worthy quoting:

If there be any region in Arabia entitled to the epithet 'Happy', other than the Yemen, whose glories were well known to the ancients, it is this province of Dhufar, an Arcadia of luxuriant forests that clothe steep mountains overlooking the sea, of perennial streams and sunny meadows, of wide vistas and verdant glades. Here, according to the writer of Genesis, Jehovah had set the limit of the known world 'as thou goest east unto Mount Sephar'; hither came the ancient Egyptians for frankincense to embalm their sacred Pharaohs; here, may be, were hewed the pillars of Solomon's Temple, if indeed Dhufar be not the site of Ophir itself, and the traditional market for ivory and peacocks' feathers.<sup>60</sup>

Having journeyed through the Empty Quarter, Thomas was able to provide us with descriptions of the Bedouins in terms of their manners, characters, customs and life. Like James Wellsted, who admired the 'inherent spirit' of the Bedouins, Thomas confirms their absolute belief in God's Will. The Bedouin's philosophy of the unavailability of events, he asserts, controlled all his life, and, thus, expressions such as 'Reliance is in God', 'What is written must come to pass' and 'God be praised' did not

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. xii.

part with his lips.<sup>61</sup> A Bedouin fisherman who swam off armed with nothing more than inflated sheepskin, when asked by Thomas if he were not afraid of being eaten by sharks, said once:

That is in God's hands,.. "If it is not written that I should die young why should I fear? I may swim without danger. And if it is written that I should not reach old age, there is no escape from that which is written."<sup>62</sup>

Thomas found this hard philosophy reflected in every aspect of their life. They slept on the sands, which were extremely hot by the day and very cold by night, as they had no other clothes than the cotton shreds they wore all the time, nor blankets, which would be a 'nuisance' and be considered 'effeminate'.<sup>63</sup> Thomas points out that the isolation of the desert and its hardship influenced the Bedouins. Their life depended essentially on the camel, and it was limited to the quest for green pastures and rain. They were indifferent, he argues, to the immense changing world beyond the desert; the rise and collapse of empires; science and art and learning, as all these had no meaning to them and therefore did not exist.<sup>64</sup>

Thomas paints a gloomy picture of the primitive life of the Bedouins. He found them extremely poor, and his portrait of a miserable tent in the Rub al Khali offered a typical example of wretched nomadic life:

It consisted of two twenty-foot strips of very roughly woven dark brown and white wool, the dark colour of camel-hair, the light possibly from the sheep's wool of Hasa. Every thread had been spun and woven by the women within. Lying about was the bodkin used in its manufacture, a few iron camp-fire pegs, tent-pegs once the horns of an antelope, the long iron bars used for digging water-holes, a rounded stone from the northern steppe to serve as hammer, two camel saddles and a variety of crude leathern buckets on rough wooden frames, one a water trough, another a receptacle for skins. In

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 150.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions*, pp. 282-283.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.200.



such items are comprised the few poor belongings of the nomad folk other than the nobler possessions of camels and firearms.<sup>65</sup>

Another image of their misery that Thomas depicts concerns health care. He found them using the urine or the vomit of the young cow camel for curing their diseases, and the women using it as a hair-wash to kill vermin.<sup>66</sup> Elsewhere, Thomas states that the sands had many fleas and lice, and whenever two of his companions found themselves not busy at the halt, they would engage, reciprocally, in a flea-hunt, each in turn lying face downwards on the sand, while his friend sat by his head and deloused with a dagger the long dishevelled locks.<sup>67</sup> Such a picture might be interpreted as a deliberate technique that Thomas uses to entertain his readers. But, as a matter of fact, a person who knows desert life, as I do, would not assume any exaggeration in Thomas's description.<sup>68</sup> Those 'children of nature', as Thomas dubs them sometimes, were extremely simple. They were, as he has mentions, indifferent to the 'great changing world' outside their huge desert. He tells us that his companions had never seen a watch, and were delighted, once, when he let them to put their ears next to the face of the biggest chronometer to hear its ticking: 'as they heard the marvel, their faces would light up with a smile and one would look at the other in wonderment before suddenly bursting out, 'La Illah il' Allah'- 'There is no god, but God'.<sup>69</sup> On other occasion, they were surprised by his electric torch, and they marvelled whether they could follow a stray or stolen camel with it. One of them, Thomas claims, when he put his hand over the lighted end, found out that there was basically no heat, and brought the vision to the notice of his friends

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 225.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 224.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 239.

<sup>68</sup> The area where I was born, Bidiyyah, located on the skirts of the Eastern Sands of Oman, enabled me to see in my childhood some peculiar customs of the Bedouins.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 132.

who repeated the action and when, instead of feeling heat they saw the red colour of blood and vague finger-bones, they called out, astonishingly: 'There is no god but God. Surely the Sahib's tribe must be a wonderful people?'.<sup>70</sup> The picture of their childish manner and simplicity would not be complete if we do not mention what Thomas had seen once, when one of his Bedouins, in order to entertain him, put the wriggling tail of a lizard and half its body into his mouth.<sup>71</sup>

Despite this picture of the Bedouins as 'childish', Thomas represents their character and behaviour more positively. He tells us about their kindness, which he observed during the course of his journey. For example, when water or food was scarce, no one would think of not sharing it evenly with his fellow travellers, and if any one was absent, possibly pasturing his camels, all would wait his arrival, to eat together. At Banaiyan, he writes, after a thirsty day's journey when they arrived at a water hole no drop of water passed the lips of the first to arrive until the last had caught up. 'If this precarious condition of life produces savagery between enemies, it breeds none the less a fine humanity among friends', writes Thomas.<sup>72</sup> He tells us also about their inherent faith in God and tolerance. He argues that the claim sometimes made by bigoted townsmen that the Bedouins neither pray nor fast, was not proved by his experience. They all the time, he adds, prayed diligently, indifferent to the many dangers of the desert with its hunger and thirst. He describes their religious manner as follows:

Suddenly at my side after long silences a Badu would burst out like our Puritan forefathers with, 'Deliver me from mine enemies, O God,' 'Deliver me, O Lord, from evil.' The last note of the Credo calling them to prayer at dawn would be greeted with long-drawn-out supplications to Allah, as the shivering wretches struggled to their feet to worship as their first act of the day. Even a devout Christian travelling in their

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 274.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 238.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 260.



company, his mind obsessed with worldly affairs, might well learn something from their complete acceptance of and trust in the Unseen but Ever Present God.<sup>73</sup>

Notwithstanding this religious feeling, Thomas asserts that he felt among them a tolerance uncommon among townsmen, whose 'smattering' of the Koran made them feel that they held, exclusively, the divine truth. Another virtue of the Bedouins over the townsmen, Thomas points out, was their self-esteem. On occasion, he recounts, the Sultan of Muscat, while touring with Thomas in the northern area of Oman, was greeted by some Bedouins as normally as any traveller. Thomas comments:

But verbal obsequiousness finds no counterpart in action, for the poorest free-born Badu is so obsessed by the absolute omnipotence of God that he considers no man his superior, and will speak with the easy freedom that springs from that consciousness.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, he was impressed by some features that the Bedouins enjoyed. He admired their love of the camel. He states that the camel to the Bedouin was 'her master's dearest dear, and he will cease fighting her battles only with his latest breath'.<sup>75</sup> During his travels in Oman, which were always on camels, he became sympathetic with this 'poor beast', but he declares that his Bedouin companions' constant consideration for their camels was remarkable. Often he found himself the only member of the party in the saddle, while the others marched for long hours to rest their beasts, and ran everywhere to get rare moist bunches of camel-thorn with which to feed them, as in those isolated wastes 'if the camel dies, its master dies', says Thomas.<sup>76</sup> Another feature that he admired in the characters of the Bedouins was their sense of humour. During the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, pp.157-158.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions*, p. 121.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 116.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 176.

long march in the Empty Quarter he was entertained by his companions' chanting and conversation:

They were merry enough conversationalists, even if their subjects were limited to camels, rifles and women. The conspiracy of silence of European convention is completely absent, with the element of conscious indecency. It was like schoolboys ridiculing a bad bowler, or deriding one of their number who persistently failed to 'convert' a 'try', for they see no shame in joking about each other's impotence with women.<sup>77</sup>

What is worth mentioning about the Bedouins' sense of humour is their ability narrate, which Thomas was quite impressed by, for they told stories in simple rhythm: 'Badu narrative speech tends to fall into the measure of blank verse'.<sup>78</sup> Thus, he translated into English in *Arabia Felix* many folk stories, such as the legends of Bu Zaid Al Hilali and his kinsman Dhiyab bin Ghanim that his companions narrated to him from time to time on the march or round the camp fire. The ability to read tracks was another feature that struck Thomas in the desert. He tells us that he was overwhelmed at the precision of his companions' description of the camels that were ahead of them in the journey. The Bedouins, he argues, had an amazing skill of reading the facts of the tracks they followed; 'in comparison the finger-print methods of the West seem a slow, laborious, technical process', he writes.<sup>79</sup>

On the other hand, he condemns some of their characteristics such as greed, intrusion and disputes. He believes that 'the greed of the Badu is proverbial', and 'the Badu will unblushingly ask for the moon!'.<sup>80</sup> Elsewhere, he claims that he sometimes during his journey was compelled to move his camp with all speed, for as long as he

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 124.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.167.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p.178.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 187, and p. 27.



remained 'the stray starvelings of the sands' would 'batten on' him.<sup>81</sup> In fact, their intrusion in food or even in conversation was not tolerated by the 'European' culture of Thomas:

On one occasion, for instance, a Kathiri, seeing the milk bowl at my side, suddenly held it to his lips and drained its contents; they were dregs, it is true, but a European could not afford to show resentment; even my heart-to-heart talks with Shaikh Salih were not undisturbed, for one or other of my party spotting us from afar and finding the attraction irresistible would come up with a hearty salaam and sit down without a 'by your leave,' to hear what it was all about.<sup>82</sup>

This clash between the European and the nomadic cultures led Thomas sometimes to exaggerate in simplifying his companions as animals: 'the dweller of the desert, like a child or an animal requires a very slow and careful approach', he says.<sup>83</sup> However, he elsewhere shows some understanding of the nature of desert life, and interprets the greed and intrusion of the Bedouin in a different way:

His adulation and flattery are of the open, honest kind, too extravagant ever to deceive. He does not cringe, and though he will shamelessly ask for money or anything he sees, he suffers no rebuff by being refused. His mood is quixotic. Having sworn that parting with you is like parting with his own soul, when the time comes he takes his dues and departs laughing, conscious only of the inexorable will of God.<sup>84</sup>

As regards disputes, Thomas learnt from his journeys with the Bedouins that 'feuds family, tribal, and factional, are without beginning and without end'.<sup>85</sup> Thus, he maintains, raiding to them was the 'spice of life', and minor theft was uncommon and

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p. 190.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 192.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 187.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions*, p. 289.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 289.

looked on as immoral, but robbery with violence, murder, and looting were 'as unquestionably honourable as military prowess in Europe'.<sup>86</sup>

Beside these images of the Bedouins, Thomas provides interesting descriptions of the sands. He was struck by some peculiar phenomena in the Empty Quarter. In the sands of Uruq Ad-hahuya, he encountered a peculiar phenomenon of 'singing sands'. As the party moved along, a hasty 'droning' sound began and it continued for about two minutes and finished as suddenly as it had begun. Thomas describes this occurrence as 'the siren of a moderate-sized steamship'. Elsewhere in the sands of Umm Dharta, he experienced a similar incident when he heard wheezing under his camel's feet 'like the falling of a spent bullet'.<sup>87</sup> Another peculiar phenomenon that Thomas describes is the quicksands of Umm Assamim, which appeared to him as an expanse of salt plain, giving no hint to the unwary traveller of its 'treacherous bogs', for many perished in its devouring sands.<sup>88</sup> He was also impressed by sand dunes:

Very impressive is a great dune region at first sight — a vast ocean of billowing sands, here tilted into sudden frowning heights, and there falling to gentle valleys merciful for camels, though without a scrap of verdure in view. Dunes of all sizes, unsymmetrical in relation to one another, but with the exquisite roundness of a girl's breasts, rise tier upon tier like a mighty mountain system.<sup>89</sup>

More interestingly, he portrays an impressive perspective of the desert:

There were moments when we came suddenly upon a picture of sublime grandeur, an immense and noble plastic architecture, an exquisite purity of colour, old rose-red, under the cloudless sky and brilliant light. A winter's day in Switzerland affords a comparison- the feel of the yielding substance underfoot and a glorious exhilaration in the air.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, pp. 142-144.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p. 184.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 174-175.



It is true that Thomas in *Arabia Felix*, and other travel accounts, as Reginald Kiernan argues, 'explored not only a region, but the way of life and the soul of a people'.<sup>91</sup> Thomas, indeed, threw light over the unknown South and South-western regions of Oman. Prospects of everyday life, landscapes of the country, peculiar customs and manners in Dhufar, conversations in the Bedouin stories, legends and beliefs, steadfastness of the desert dwellers, their faith in the absolute will of Allah, their greed and intrusion, their loyalty to each others, and their love and kindness to their camels— all are represented in full-length descriptions. Nevertheless, his *Arabia Felix* never escaped from prejudices. He uses the same discourse of power or hegemony that he used in *Alarms and Excursions*, as we have seen, when he justified attacking the natives of Musandam for being 'wild men' of 'quite innocent barbarism'. In Dhufar, the land of 'anarchy and treachery' as he describes it, Thomas articulates the same discourse of power:

Instability is the chief characteristic of any regime in tribal Arabia. It is inherent in the Arab genius, and springs from the preponderating part played by personalities and the relative unimportance of the machine. Where the strong personality is of the government or is well disposed to government all will be well. Where stronger men are without, trouble lurks.<sup>92</sup>

Thomas, indeed, in the words of Andrew Taylor, 'had all the self-confidence of an imperial civil servant'.<sup>93</sup> In a conversation with a Bedouin in Dhufar, the desert man was not convinced by Thomas's idea that agriculture and fishing would be better for him than raiding, and the reply was: 'but how do you think we English became strong if it

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<sup>91</sup> Reginald Hugh Kiernan, *The Unveiling of Arabia: the story of Arabian travel and discovery*, (London: Harrap, 1937), p. 326.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 15.

<sup>93</sup> Andrew Taylor, *Travelling the Sands: Sagas of Exploration in the Arabian Peninsula* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 1997), p. 88.

was not by work' How do you think we get our ships and our rifles?<sup>94</sup> The innocent and illiterate Bedouin maybe did not understand such transcendence, otherwise he could have told him that English became 'strong' not only by 'work' but also by colonization and imperialism, things which were more than the Bedouin's raiding. Elsewhere, within a conversation about 'honourable' tribes, he writes that he dared not 'lose caste in the eyes' of his companions and told them: 'We Nasara [Christians]..are a very powerful tribe'.<sup>95</sup> Beside this hegemonic discourse, he sometimes deprecates the people of Dhufar, accusing them of treachery and barbarism. On one occasion, for instance, when he was touring the Qara Mountain, one of his companions could not tolerate the sight of skinning a baby rabbit and walked away bowing his head, but Thomas found it suitable to comment: 'a display of sentiment unusual in these barbarous places!'<sup>96</sup> Another example of Thomas's prejudices is his description of one of his escorts in Dhufar, who appeared to him 'a most depressing companion' because, beside his complaint at the poverty of the government and the deficiency of his wage in contrast to the vast salaries of the English, he was through Thomas's eyes 'yellow-faced, with a long scraggy goatee and a miserable physique even for late middle-age'.<sup>97</sup> Andrew Taylor argues that in addition to the many other manners they inherited from the Victorians, some travellers of the twentieth century appear to have had an 'overweening confidence' in their own scientific attempts.<sup>98</sup> On this point, Thomas was quite 'overweening' indeed. In Dhufar, while taking skull-measurements of the natives, for example, he could not find 'willing subjects' maybe because of a religious reason or because they found it shameful to subject their heads to measurement, but he did not hesitate to dub them as 'rude people'

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<sup>94</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 27.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, pp. 70-71.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>98</sup> Taylor, *Travelling the Sands*, p. 88.



concerned about magic or worse. Moreover, on one occasion he offensively asked a Somali police officer, at Salalh, who apparently did not suit his anthropological requirements: 'Are you quite sure you are pure-bred?' The man disappeared joking, 'God is the knower, and then my mother'.<sup>99</sup>

## 2. Wilfred Thesiger, 1945

Wilfred Patrick Thesiger was born in 1910 at the British Legation in Addis Ababa and spent nine years in Abyssinia. He was educated at Eton and at Magdalen College, Oxford. When he was 23, he made his first journey into Abyssinia, exploring the Awash River to its end and marking himself as the first European to travel through the Aussa Sultanate. From 1935 to 1944 he served with the Sudan Political Service, the Special Operations Executive in Syria and the Special Air Service in the Western Desert. During these years Thesiger took the advantage of exploring the Arab World, including Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Syria, Palestine and Lebanon. In 1945 he joined the Desert Locust Research Organization, and over five years he travelled with the Bedouins of Oman through the Empty Quarter and Southern Arabia. From 1950, looking for an 'alternative' to the desert, Thesiger lived with the Marsh Arabs in Southern Iraq for eight years until he was excluded from Iraq by the revolution of 1958. During this period he also journeyed in Persia, Iraqi Kurdistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 1959 he was back in Abyssinia and then went to Kenya, where he voyaged in the Northern Frontier District and lived from time to time with the Samburu and Turkana for more than 30 years.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>100</sup> This brief biography is based on Thesiger's autobiography, *The Life of My Choice* (London: Collins, 1987).

For these extensive journeys, Thesiger had received the Founder's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society, the Lawrence of Arabia Medal of the Royal Central Asian Society, the Livingstone Medal of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and the Burton Memorial Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society. He was also honoured with the Heinemann Award, Fellowship of the Royal Society of Literature, and Honorary D.Litt. from the University of Leicester.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, he has been described by many writers with several admiring expressions such as the 'last explorer', a 'glorious anachronism', and a 'fulcrum in twentieth-century travel'.<sup>102</sup>

During five years in Oman, Thesiger was able to make six voyages. The first one took him from Salala to the sands of Ghanim, and while he was awaiting his companions from Bait Kathir, he crossed the Qara Mountains. In October 1946, he made his first crossing of the Empty Quarter. This long trip took him from Salala to Mughshin on the southern borders of the Empty Quarter, where he penetrated the Great Desert up to the Liwa oasis, and then returned to Salala over the gravel plains of Oman to avoid the same route. The third journey took Thesiger, in March 1947, from Salala to Mukalla in Yemen. Though he had brought about his dream of crossing the Empty Quarter, his fascination with the sands and the tranquillity of nomad life had not been assuaged. Therefore, he returned from England to Hadhramaut with the intention of crossing the Empty Quarter again, but along the Western side this time. In November 1947, the journey of the second crossing started from Mukalla. He proceeded to the country of the Saar, the most dreaded tribe in Southern Arabia, and he went on to Manwakh where he commenced passing through the Western sands of the Empty

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<sup>101</sup> For more details about these rewards see: Alexander Maitland, 'Wilfred Thesiger: Traveller from an Antique Land' *Blackwood's Magazine*, 328 (October, 1980), 244-263 (p.260).

<sup>102</sup> See Christian Tyler, 'Private View: The Savage in the Three-Piece Suit', *The Financial Times* (30 October 1993), p. 24., and Mark Cocker, *Loneliness and Time: British Travel Writing in the Twentieth Century* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992), p. 71.



Quarter up to Sulaiyil on the borders of Saudi Arabia, where he was arrested, for a while, by the fanatical Wahhabis. From Sulaiyil, he travelled eastwards to the Trucial Coast or Sahil Oman, reaching Abu Dhabi, Buraimi and Sharja. The fifth journey took place between November 1948 and April 1949, when he returned from England to Buraimi, staying with Shaikh Zayid and accompanying him on hawking trips. He visited the Liwa oasis and managed to penetrate the interior of Oman, passing through the Duru country and finding the mysterious quicksand at Umm al Samim, where he was informed by some of his companions that several people and flocks of goats had disappeared beneath the surface of those sands. Thence, he marched southwards down to the coast opposite the island of Masira. Coming back to Buraimi, he traversed the Wahiba country along the Batha valley of Bediya and up Westward under the Hajar mountains of Oman. Thesiger's last journey was between November 1949 and March 1950, when he came back to ascend the Green Mountain, but the Imam of Oman Mohammed Bin Abdullah Al-Khalili prevented him from achieving this dream. Disappointed, he left Oman until 1977 when he came back to find the area had changed dramatically by the discovery and production of oil.

Unlike previous travellers to Oman, Thesiger was not motivated in his journeys by service of Empire or scientific interests. Although, it is true, he came to the Empty Quarter employed by the Anti-locust Centre and collected many specimens of fauna and flora and made maps of the country, he initially made his travels for personal pleasure. What distinguishes Thesiger from Bertram Thomas at this point is his frankness in articulating his motives and philosophy of exploration. He declares that drawing maps and collecting plants were 'incidental' for him and he went there to 'find peace in the hardship of desert travel and the company of desert peoples'.<sup>103</sup> Elsewhere, he states that it was 'the spell of the great desert' and 'the lure of the unknown' that motivated him to

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<sup>103</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 242.

travel among the Bedouins of the Empty Quarter.<sup>104</sup> This frankness led Thesiger later to regret mapping the area which he travelled through: 'I realize that the maps I made helped others with more material aims'.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, he shared with Thomas the desire for fame. When he decided to cross the Empty Quarter, he chose the more difficult ways, claiming that Thomas used the 'easiest way' where the sand dunes were small and the wells were common.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, he insists frequently that he was the 'first European' to explore the Sultanate of Aussa in Abyssinia and to reach the Liwa oasis and the quicksand of Umm al Samim in Arabia.<sup>107</sup> To Thesiger, however, the fame of being an explorer was 'incidental' to his simple love of nomadic life. In an interview with Naim Attallah, he answers a question about whether he feels a sense of achievement because of some critics' recognition of him as 'the greatest of all explorers' in which he says 'I think it's balls [...] it's absolute nonsense'.<sup>108</sup> His philosophy of exploration is articulated in his different books: he travelled 'longing to catch the ancient world before it vanished for ever' and to recapture 'that silence that we have now driven from the world'. Thesiger went to the Empty Quarter not for economic or political aims. He made his journey to escape from the mechanical world, which was produced by Western materialistic civilization, 'I had done it to escape a little longer from the machines which dominated our world', he says.<sup>109</sup> This is the philosophy that led Thesiger later to condemn the modernization which was brought about by the production of oil in Oman and all Arabia, and it is the same notion that led him to

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<sup>104</sup> Wilfred Thesiger, 'A Further Journey Across The Empty Quarter' *The Geographical Journal*, 113 (1949), 21-46 (p. 21 and p. 43).

<sup>105</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 75.

<sup>106</sup> Wilfred Thesiger, 'Obituary: Bertram Sidney Thomas', *The Geographical Journal*, 117 (1951), 117-119 (p.118).

<sup>107</sup> Thesiger, *The Life of My Choice*, p. 444.

<sup>108</sup> See: Naim Attallah, *Speaking for the Oldie* (London: Quartet Books, 1994), p. 262.

<sup>109</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 242.



escape to Kenya and spend his later life in Maralal, where cars and machines are few and the life is more nomadic.<sup>110</sup>

Thesiger's travel accounts of Oman were published first in several journals and magazines, including: *Geographical Journal*, *Geographical Magazine*, *Listener*, and *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*.<sup>111</sup> His narratives were later collected in the book *Arabian Sands*, whose first edition appeared in 1959. Thesiger's work was received with admiration and highly praised by critics. One of the commentators of the first edition, Lord Belhaven, wrote of Thesiger in 1960: 'the master of a clear and unaffected prose which shows everything [...] what a story this is!'.<sup>112</sup> Richard Holmes who reviewed *Arabian Sands* in *The Times* considers it a 'masterpiece', and J. B. Kelly, an Arabist, describes Thesiger's book as a 'saga of the sands', and places it, for 'literary qualities', in a degree higher than some classic travel books on Arabia such as Charles Doughty's *Arabia Deserta* and T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.<sup>113</sup> Even Michael Asher, who wrote an unsentimental biography of Thesiger, considers *Arabian Sands* as 'the finest book ever written on Arabia and its bedouin'.<sup>114</sup> Despite this wide acclaim that Thesiger received for his works, he never considered himself as an author

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<sup>110</sup> Before he died in London, 24 August 2003, Thesiger preferred to live at Maralal in Kenya, escaping Western civilization and making a family of his Samburu friends. Alexander Maitland claims that Thesiger's will for his foster-sons, Lawi and Laputa, is 'to be left out in the bush for the hyenas after he dies'. See: Maitland, 'Wilfred Thesiger: Traveller From An Antique Land', p. 261.

<sup>111</sup> See the bibliography of this thesis for full details about these travel accounts. Obviously, the style that Thesiger used in writing these travel accounts is different from that of his *Arabian Sands*. Unlike the book, these accounts seldom do declare his attitudes to the Bedouins and their customs. Rather, they are full of names of people, places, plants, animals and insects. It seems that they were written for the audience of the *Geographical Journal* and other scientific periodicals, for which Thesiger paid attention to the standards of academic writing such as taking full notes and citing references. *Arabian Sands*, however, is written in a more flowing literary style, in which the language and narration are articulated in a poetic form.

<sup>112</sup> Lord Belhaven, 'Empty Quarter No More', *The Geographical Journal*, 126 (1960), 73-74 (p. 74).

<sup>113</sup> Kelly, 'A Saga of the Sands', p. 40.

<sup>114</sup> Michael Asher, *Thesiger: A Biography* (London: Viking, 1994), p. 10. Asher criticised Thesiger severely at some points, as we shall see in this chapter. Roger Clarke, who reviewed Asher's *biography* of Thesiger, wrote: 'The result is a critique that weaves between baffled hatred and cautious admiration'. See Roger Clarke, 'Curdled dreams abandoned in the desert', *The Independent* (10 October 1994), p. 16.

or an 'intellectual'. On different occasions, he declared that he did not mean to write a book about his journeys. After leaving the Empty Quarter in 1950 he was nine years travelling elsewhere and never thought about writing *Arabian Sands* until, as he claims, his friend the literary agent Graham Watson asked him to write it, though his reply was 'I'm dammed if I'm going to write a book'.<sup>115</sup>

Thesiger's representation of his companions, the Bedouins of Oman, is a story of admiration. He was impressed by their patience, bravery, tolerance, generosity and nobility. He found their life always 'desperately hard':

These tribesmen are accustomed since birth to the physical hardships of the desert, to drink the scanty bitter water of the Sands, to eat gritty unleavened bread, to endure the maddening irritation of driven sand, intense cold, heat, and blinding glare in a land without shade or cloud.<sup>116</sup>

Elsewhere, he describes their bodies as 'weathered by life in the desert until only the essential flesh, bone, and skin remained'.<sup>117</sup> Thesiger learned in the Empty Quarter that whoever would live with the Bedouins should accept their customs, and follow their standards, and that only those who had travelled with them could value the strain of such a life. He asserts that they were harsh critics of those who lacked endurance, good humour, hospitality, loyalty or bravery. Thesiger came to the Empty Quarter deliberately to live the harsh life of the desert, and during five years he managed to accustom himself to the Bedouin conventions because he believed that 'it was a life which produced much that was noble, nothing that was gracious'.<sup>118</sup> According to

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<sup>115</sup> See the interview with Thesiger by Fiona McWilliam, 'A life of his own', *The Geographical Magazine*, 70, no. 9 (1998), 39-42 (p. 41).

<sup>116</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 49.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, p. 93.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.



Michael Asher, Thesiger later summed up his theory about the desert as 'the harder the life, the finer the person'.<sup>119</sup>

To Thesiger, the nobility of the Bedouins was moral as well as physical. They appreciated liberty far more than ease or comfort, were careless of suffering and took high self-esteem in the hardship of their lives. Thus, he maintains, they enjoyed superiority over the townsmen who hated and loathed them.<sup>120</sup> Despite the Bedouins' poverty and their miserable life, Thesiger gives examples of their nobility and loyalty. He confesses that none of his companions thought to steal any of his money or possessions while he was a stranger among them in the wastes of the Empty Quarter:

This money was in canvas bags tied with string; the saddlebags were unfastened. My companions were desperately poor and yet the coins were as safe in my saddle-bags as if they had been in a bank. I was five years with Bedu and I never lost a single coin nor a round of ammunition, although this was even more valuable to them than money.<sup>121</sup>

In the desert the Bedouins shared with Thesiger, or Umbarak (the blessed man) as they called him, whatever they had: 'brackish' water, 'soggy' bread, and 'tough' camel meat. Thesiger comments that the desert code was to share food, no matter how little it was, equally among fellow- travellers. Once, they hunted a small Arabian hare and after dividing it into equal portions, Bin Kabina, Thesiger's close companion, said 'God! I have forgotten to divide the liver', but the others insisted that 'Umbarak' should take it. He accepted it finally after protesting that the liver should be divided as well.<sup>122</sup> On another occasion, when Thesiger was captured by the Wahhabis at Sulaiyil in the Saudi territories, John Philby who played a major role in releasing him, gave Thesiger's companions some money. As they left Sulaiyil, their guide Mohammed gave Thesiger

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<sup>119</sup> Asher, *Thesiger*, p. 253.

<sup>120</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 84.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, p. 74.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, p. 134.

his portion of Philby's money, saying: 'Here is a fifth of it, your share; we are travelling companions and should share all things alike'.<sup>123</sup>

Thesiger speaks more strikingly about Bedouins' generosity. He represents their 'lavish hospitality' as a legend. In the desert, he saw an old man who looked very poor and his skin 'sagged in folds over the cavity of his stomach'. Thesiger's first impression told him that the man would be 'a proper old beggar'. However, he learnt later that the man used to be the richest one of his tribe but his generosity 'ruined' him, as no one ever came to his tents but he slaughtered a camel to feed them.<sup>124</sup> Elsewhere, he recounts this amazing story:

I glanced back and was relieved to see that it was only a small boy, hurrying along to catch up with us. We waited for him. He was dressed in a white shirt and head-cloth, and wore a dagger; he was little more than four feet high and perhaps eleven years old. After we had formally exchanged the news, he stopped in front of our camels, held out an arm and said, 'You may not go on.' I thought, 'Damn, are we really to be stopped by this child?' The others waited in silence. The boy repeated, 'You may not go on'; and then, pointing to some dunes five or six miles away, added, 'You must come to my tents. I will kill a camel for your lunch. I will give you fat and meat.' We protested, saying that we had far to go before sunset, but the child insisted. Finally, however, he gave way, saying 'It is all wrong but what more can I do?'<sup>125</sup>

The aspect of the Bedouins' generosity that struck Thesiger greatly was their openhandedness though they were very poor:

Our hosts brought us milk. We blew the froth aside and drank deep; they urged us to drink more, saying, 'You will find no milk in the sands ahead of you. Drink—drink. You are our guests. God brought you here—drink.' I drank again, knowing even as I did so that they would go hungry and thirsty that night, for they had nothing else, no other food and no water.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p. 219.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p. 66.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p. 267.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. 122.



Another aspect of their generosity was an unselfishness which Thesiger could not stand sometimes. On one occasion in the desert, while they were awaiting eagerly a dish of hare that was prepared by Bin Kabina, after a month since they had eaten meat, some other Bedouins came up. Very readily, Thesiger points out, his companions dished up the hare and the bread and served it to the new comers, asserting that they were their guests and God had brought them on that 'a blessed day'.<sup>127</sup> Like Bertram Thomas who often during his journey had to move his camp rapidly to avoid 'the stray starvelings of the sands', Thesiger was 'irritated' and 'disturbed' by the number of guests whom his companions received with satisfaction.<sup>128</sup> However, Thesiger was extremely impressed by the Bedouin's 'magnificent generosity', to use Michael Asher's words, to the extent that he contrasted it with the English manner, 'I pondered on this desert hospitality and, compared it with our own', he says.<sup>129</sup> Indeed, he was 'absorbed', as Andrew Taylor asserts, in Arabia and its hospitality.<sup>130</sup> Thesiger gives this picture:

It is true that the worst loneliness is to be lonely in a crowd. I have been lonely at school and in European towns where I knew nobody, but I have never been lonely among Arabs. I have arrived in their towns where I was unknown, and I have walked into the bazaar and greeted by a shopkeeper. He has invited me to sit beside him in his shop and has sent for tea. Other people have come along and joined us. They have asked me who I was, where I came from, and innumerable questions which we should never ask a stranger. Then one of them has said, 'Come and lunch', and at lunch I have met other Arabs, and someone else has asked me to dinner. I have wondered sadly what Arabs brought up in this tradition have thought when they visited England; and I have hoped that they realized that we are as unfriendly to each other as we must appear to be to them.<sup>131</sup>

Tolerance and courtesy were other values that Thesiger found in his Bedouins in the Arabian desert. He confirms what was suggested by Bertram Thomas, that the

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, p. 148.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, p. 60.

<sup>129</sup> Asher, *Thesiger*, p. 15, and Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 148.

<sup>130</sup> Taylor, *Travelling the Sands*, p. 132.

<sup>131</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 108.

desert Arabs were far more tolerant than the townsmen. Thesiger argues that the Bedouins, though the bigoted townsmen disparaged their ignorance of Islam, were punctual in their prayers and fasted during Ramadan despite thirst and hunger in the desert. But they were not fanatical, he asserts, and once when one of them asked him, 'Why don't you become a Muslim and then you would really be one of us?', they laughed as Thesiger answered: 'God protect me from the Devil!' invoking the prayer that Arabs always used in rejecting something disgraceful or offensive.<sup>132</sup> Thesiger praised the tolerance of his companions who treated him courteously, while religious fanaticism was spread across the northern and western parts of Arabia as well as the interior of Oman at that time. In the Wahhabi regions, Thesiger experienced the ugly aspects of fanaticism. At Tihama, he saw some boys whose hands had been cut off simply because they had been circumcised in a way which King Ibn Saud had prohibited. At Sulaiyil, Thesiger and his companions were arrested by the Wahhabis because he was an 'infidel' and his companions 'sold themselves into the service of an infidel for gold', so they were 'worse'. Wherever they passed, he claims, old men spat on the ground and children followed them singing disdainfully, 'Al Nasrani, al Nasrani' or the Christian.<sup>133</sup> Thesiger tells us that when some of the Wahhabis shocked his companions by asking why they had not killed him in the sands and taken his money, Bin Kabina kept grumbling, 'they are dogs and sons of dogs. They say you are an infidel, but you are a hundred times better than such Muslims as these'.<sup>134</sup> Similarly, in the interior of Oman at Tawi Yaser, where the party camped for a night, avoiding spreading the news in the Imam's territories, as they would be arrested, an elderly bigoted man joined them. After serving him with dates and coffee, he prayed

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid, p. 127.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, pp.208-212.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, p. 217.



'interminably', and sat in silence fingering his 'untidy' beard. Yet, when the Bedouins tried to entertain themselves by jokes, the man became angry and irritated them by arguing that they should not escort an 'infidel'. On of them, however, replied furiously in order to dismiss him, 'I may not be learned in religious matters, but at any rate I don't spend the whole time I am praying scratching my arse'.<sup>135</sup> Considering this kind of rude treatment from some fanatical Muslims, it is noteworthy that Thesiger found refuge in the desert, where he saw extreme generosity and tolerance. He gives this example:

We reached Bai five days after leaving Haushi [...] Old Tamaitm appeared, hobbling towards us. I slid stiffly from my camel and greeted them. The old man flung his arms about me, with tears running down his face, too moved to be coherent. Bitter had been his wrath when the Bait Kathir returned from Ramlat al Ghafia. He said they had brought black shame upon his tribe by deserting me.<sup>136</sup>

In the Empty Quarter, Thesiger was touched by all the values of the desert: endurance, nobility, dignity, hospitality and tolerance. Even in his old age he still remembered the 'five most memorable years of his life':

I have never forgotten the open-handed generosity of the Bedu with any money they had acquired, no matter if it left them penniless; their total honesty; their pride in themselves and in their tribe; their loyalty to each other and not least to me, a stranger of alien faith from an unknown land, a loyalty tested more than once at risk of their lives.<sup>137</sup>

In the Empty Quarter Thesiger found his niche, so to speak. He declares that in the desert, though barren, he never felt 'homesick' for green meadows and forests in spring, but when he was in England he 'longed with an ache that was almost physical to be back in Arabia'.<sup>138</sup> Elsewhere, he articulates a kind of nostalgia: after suffering a number of starving nights in the sands, he says: 'If I were in London I would give

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, p. 273.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>137</sup> Thesiger, *The Life of My Choice*, p. 399.

<sup>138</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 179.

anything to be here'.<sup>139</sup> Thesiger justifies this craving for the Empty Quarter with his belief that the Bedouins derived their values from the desert: their deep religious instinct, regard for fellowship, generosity, dignity, humour, courage, endurance and love of poetry. But, he asserts, as modern life is introduced into their society they are inclined to loose all these values and become 'a parasitic proletariat squatting around oil-fields in the fly-blown squalor of shanty towns'.<sup>140</sup> This means, in fact, that he longs for the past as an ideal time of life. This is nostalgia. According to Michael Asher, Thesiger wished not to live in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but 'to have gone back to the Edwardian age'.<sup>141</sup> In *Arabian Sands* he asserts that he 'craved for the past, resented the present and dreaded the future'.<sup>142</sup> His philosophy, so to speak, which he summed up in these three phrases, emerges from his all writing.<sup>143</sup> If we take this into consideration, we may understand the restless struggle that Thesiger waged against Western civilization.

In his preface to *Arabian Sands*, Thesiger states that when he came back to Oman in 1977 he was 'disillusioned' by modern life that discovery of oil had brought about in Oman and the Gulf. He argues that the 'traditional' Bedouin life that he had experienced during his 'five memorable years' in the Empty Quarter had been ruined by the introduction of cars and machines. Indeed, he had predicted such changes and 'disintegration' in the region in 1948 when he wrote his third account about the Empty Quarter, 'I know that they and their way of life are an anachronism and will tend to disappear', and therefore he avoided, he claims elsewhere, any contact with all oil

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p. 141.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, p. 87.

<sup>141</sup> Asher, *Thesiger*, p. 22.

<sup>142</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 34.

<sup>143</sup> See for example: *The Marsh Arabs*, (England: Penguin, 1978), pp.59-60, *My Kenya Days* (London: Flamingo, 1995), p. 153, and *Desert Marsh and Mountain: The World of Nomad* (London: Collins, 1979), p. 8.



companies that had started surveying some parts of Oman.<sup>144</sup> Loathing most of the aspects of Western civilization is consistent in Thesiger's writing:

All my life I had hated machines. I could remember how bitterly at school I had resented reading the news that someone had flown across the Atlantic or travelled through the Sahara in a car. I had realized even then that the speed and ease of mechanical transport must rob the world of all diversity.<sup>145</sup>

As Charlotte Edwardes argues, Thesiger 'effortlessly turns Western values on their head'.<sup>146</sup> More provocatively, he attacks the U.S.A, which, he believes, imposed its alien culture on indigenous people all over the world. He always accused the Americans of spreading their mass, materialist, technological culture. He saw them, as Michael Asher points out, as arrogant, vulgar people without breeding, history or tradition, 'The Americans are a complete disaster', Asher quotes him.<sup>147</sup> Simon Courtauld claims that Thesiger once was shocked, while listening to the news and a report of the UN committee on human rights in Saudi Arabia: 'Who the hell are they to judge how other countries should behave? Different peoples and cultures respect different rights— why should America be able to impose its values on the rest of the world?'<sup>148</sup>

On the other hand, Thesiger praised the Islamic civilization, and believed that its noble values were capable of its endurance:

It seemed to me not altogether fanciful to suppose that if the civilizations of today were to disappear as completely as those of Babylon and Assyria, a school history book two thousand years hence might devote a few pages to the Arabs and not even mention the United States of America.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Wilfred Thesiger, 'Across the Empty Quarter' *The Geographical Journal*, 111 (1948), 1-21 (p. 18), and *Arabian Sands*, p. 238.

<sup>145</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 242.

<sup>146</sup> Charlotte Edwardes, 'The Lost World of Thesiger', *The Ecologist*, 30, no. 3 (2000), 30-34, (p. 32).

<sup>147</sup> Asher, *Thesiger: A Biography*, p. 25, and p. 512.

<sup>148</sup> See Simon Courtauld' interview with Thesiger, 'The Last Great Explore', *Sunday Telegraph* (30 May 1993), p. 7.

<sup>149</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 89.

Thesiger's philosophy is based on the idea that the past was an ideal period of life. The nobility of the Arabs came from the desert, as he felt, which meant the past when there was endurance, poverty, and nomadic life. When Arabia became rich and 'modernized' by the production of oil, it was 'doomed', and 'degradation' was the result.<sup>150</sup> Thesiger attacked modern Western life, encapsulating it in the American culture and, as we have seen, complained that it was 'without breeding, history or tradition'. Michael Asher quotes Thesiger: 'There is corruption in England, and no feeling for the old values of life. Today, if you mentioned patriotism, for example, you'd be laughed at'. Nevertheless, he hails the British Empire, insisting that 'no empire in world history has been its equal in humanity and benign dedication to the welfare of its subjects'.<sup>151</sup> Nostalgia for the past, therefore, is behind Thesiger's rejection of Western civilization. He 'craved' the old Arabia and England, and 'resented' present America.

Some scholars have criticised Thesiger's philosophy, describing it as 'over-romanticism'. Helga Graham argues that Thesiger did not realise that for the Bedouins, endurance was not a 'masochistic exercise' but was merely the only alternative to going under.<sup>152</sup> Peter Brent also questions Thesiger's romanticism: 'Are poverty and hardship, danger and constant possibility of sudden death a price people should pay for the code of honour, the freedom, the peculiar courage they give rise to? Is it a price any of us would pay?'<sup>153</sup> Thesiger's biographer, Michael Asher, is a tough critic of such ideology,

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<sup>150</sup> A recent traveller to Arabia, Jonathan Raban, takes up Thesiger's philosophy and puts it overtly in these words:

'The Arabs had betrayed an essentially English dream of what Arabs ought to be. We learned to love them for being heroically simple and poor; now, with their multi-national investment corporations, their Concord-flying businessmen, their English country houses, their expensive cameras, cars and hi-fi equipment, they were flinging our sentimental illusions back in our faces'. See Jonathan Raban, *Arabia Through the Looking Glass*, (London: Fontana, 1980), p. 16.

<sup>151</sup> Thesiger, *My Kenya Days*, p. 9.

<sup>152</sup> Helga Graham, *Arabian Time Machine: Self-Portrait of an Oil State* (London: Heinemann, 1978), pp. 5-6.

<sup>153</sup> Brent, *Far Arabia*, p. 228.



which he dubs 'selfish romanticism'. Asher believes that changes in Bedouin life were worse for Thesiger 'because he was looking at the Bedu in a purely aesthetic light— as one not trapped within their life forever'.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, anyone who knows how Oman and the whole Gulf was before the discovery of oil would not accept Thesiger's nostalgia. Oil meant to the people of that region having enough to eat rather than starving. It meant to them hospitals where diseases used to be cured by cauterisation. It meant to them schools and universities instead of ignorance and superstitions, and last but not least, it meant peace after feuds. Beyond this, the real challenge of Thesiger's romanticism is the question of whether there is a collision between wealth and 'nobility' or vice versa, a concomitance between poverty and 'nobility'. Most significantly, Thesiger and other romantic travellers to Arabia, unlike the natives, stayed there temporarily and had a choice of leaving. They chose, deliberately, to travel in the region in the winter, avoiding the unbearable heat and difficult conditions of the summer, which the natives had to live under. They set out to the desert in order to explore 'the unknown'. They had no intention to stay there nor to be Bedouins. Thesiger himself states that he could not be a Bedouin: 'I did not delude myself that I could be one of them'.<sup>155</sup> Also, later he told his close friend and official biographer Alexander Maitland that he was 'happy' to live in 'two worlds', the comfort of England and rigid Arabia: 'I like keeping the two worlds utterly distinct'.<sup>156</sup> The Empty Quarter, therefore, was for Thesiger and other romantic travellers a 'tough utopia', to borrow Jonathan Raban's words, where money and machines would not be suited.<sup>157</sup> Thesiger came to the Empty Quarter, as he declared, to 'escape' the world, but not forever. Syrine Hout argues that

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<sup>154</sup> Asher, *Thesiger*, pp. 376-387.

<sup>155</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 124.

<sup>156</sup> Maitland, 'Wilfred Thesiger: Traveller From An Antique Land', p. 256.

<sup>157</sup> Raban, *Arabia Through The Looking Glass*, p. 15.

while arduous, the Arabian sands however contained 'grains of utopia' and welcomed him as a 'transitory oasis' in which his thirst for the unknown could be assuaged.<sup>158</sup>

Thesiger did not go to the Empty Quarter with an empty pouch. Indeed, his reading of his 'hero' T. E. Lawrence and other Arabian travellers such as Richard Burton, Charles Doughty, and Bertram Thomas played an essential role in forming his imagination about the desert. At Eton, Thesiger read Alexander Kinglake's *Eothen* and other fiction about 'Eastern' people such as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*.<sup>159</sup> He states that these stories endowed him with 'all the magic of the East'.<sup>160</sup> At Oxford Thesiger read history and had, as he declares, a 'romantic, not an objective, conception of history' considering Alexander the Great as one of his 'foremost' heroes.<sup>161</sup> He had read at Oxford, also, Thomas's *Arabia Felix*, which gave him 'some appreciation' of the Bedouin life, and Lawrence's *Revolt in the Desert*,

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<sup>158</sup> Syrine C. Hout 'Grains of Utopia: The Desert as Literary Oasis in Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* and Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands*', *Utopian Studies*, 11, no. 2 (2000), 112-136, (p. 131).

<sup>159</sup> What is worth mentioning, here, is that though Kinglake saw the desert and the 'true Bedouins', his view of them was different from Thesiger's. The desert appeared to Kinglake as 'dreadful bore' with no chance of 'solitude' because the desert Arabs were 'hot fellow-creatures' screaming and squeaking at each other (p. 168). Unlike Thesiger who 'craved' the desert, Kinglake 'always felt loathe to give back to the waste' (p. 175). However, Thesiger may have enjoyed Kinglake's depictions of the desert, which overlap with the hardship and emptiness of the Empty Quarter:

'The heat grew fierce; there was no valley nor hollow, no hill, no mound, no shadow of hill nor of mound by which I could mark the way I was making. Hour by hour I advanced, and saw no change—I was still the very centre of a round horizon; hour by hour I advanced, and still there was the same, and the same, and the same—the same circle of flaming sky—the same circle of sand still glaring with light and fire.' (pp. 184-185).

*Kim* was first published in 1901. Although written for young readers, it is recognized as one of Kipling's best full-length novels. Edward Said, in his introduction to the Penguin edition 1987, considers it 'a masterpiece of imperialism' (p. 45). Thesiger, according to Michael Asher, had read *Kim* forty times and would happily read it another forty. See Asher, *Thesiger: A Biography*, p. 375. What is notable, here, is that one could find correspondence between Thesiger and *Kim*. They both were born and brought up in the East; *Kim* was a British boy born in India, whose father was a servant of the Empire, and Thesiger was born in Abyssinia, where his father was a British ambassador.

*Lord Jim* was originally published in Edinburgh by Blackwood's magazine in 1900. This novel was published, subtitled, 'A Romance' in 1901 in New York by Doubleday & McClure. Thesiger's romantic view of Arabia and Africa shares roots in Conrad's works, especially *Lord Jim*. Tracy Seeley argues that *Lord Jim*'s romance is clear in the sense of 'exploring human aspiration not simply to the ideal, but to the admittedly impossible'. See: Tracy Seeley, 'Conrad's Modernist Romance: *Lord Jim*' *ELH*, Vol. 59, no. 2 (Summer, 1992), 495-511 (p. 497).

<sup>160</sup> Thesiger, *The Life of My Choice*, p. 81.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, p. 80.



which, he confirms, 'awakened' his interest in the Arabs.<sup>162</sup> According to Michael Asher, Thesiger, though he considered Charles Doughty the 'greatest Arabian explorer', did not like his religious arrogance. He had also, Asher argues, little interest in Richard Burton, considering him as 'a sort of academic'.<sup>163</sup> Though all these Arabian travellers, in general, were Thesiger's 'spiritual forebears', to use Albert Hourani's words, Lawrence had the lion's share of influence upon him.<sup>164</sup> He admired him greatly and regretted that he had not met him. 'I would have given much to meet him [...] Indeed there was no one I would have been more interested to meet', says Thesiger.<sup>165</sup> There is a coincidence, one could say, between both travellers in terms of idealizing the Bedouins. Talking about the unique character of the desert dwellers, which Thesiger later would touch on, Lawrence asserts that 'Bedouin ways were hard even for those brought up to them, and for a stranger terrible: a death in life'. Similarly, he appreciated, before Thesiger, the Bedouins' bravery, freedom, endurance and superiority. Consider these quotations, for instance: 'He lost material ties, comforts, all superfluities and other complications to achieve a personal liberty which haunted starvation and death'. 'The desert Arab found no joy like the joy of voluntarily holding back. He found luxury in abnegation, renunciation, self restrain'. 'The faith of the desert was impossible in the towns'. Even a lament for nomadic life, similar to Thesiger's idea, was mentioned by Lawrence: 'They were now no longer bedouin, and began to suffer like the villagers from the ravages of the nomad behind', he asserts.<sup>166</sup> Thesiger also had read Thomas's *Arabia Felix* but, according to Michael Asher, he found it uninteresting, claiming that

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<sup>162</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 38.

<sup>163</sup> Asher, *Thesiger*, p. 134.

<sup>164</sup> Albert Hourani, 'In praise of ancient virtues', *Time Literary Supplement*, 4 (1987), 941-942 (p. 942).

<sup>165</sup> Thesiger, *The Life of My Choice*, p. 97.

<sup>166</sup> T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 29, 38, 40, and 35.

'his book could hardly be worse' and the Bedouins did not 'emerge as characters'.<sup>167</sup> I have mentioned previously that Thesiger, in his obituary of Thomas, considered his journey in the Empty Quarter to be 'the easiest way'. On the other hand, he preferred John Philby's *The Empty Quarter*, believing that his route was 'far more difficult' and his journey would 'always be an epic of the desert travel'.<sup>168</sup> In the same way, he considered the explorations of James Wellsted and Samuel Miles, who penetrated the interior of Oman in 1835 and 1885, respectively, as easy achievements because they 'travelled under the protection of the Sultan of Muscat'.<sup>169</sup> Thesiger's philosophy, 'the harder the life the finer the person' comes up at every point in his writing; his main criterion whether for the traveller or the natives is endurance of hardship. Interestingly, Thesiger defends his attitudes towards the Bedouins and the desert, denying that 'romanticism' was behind the British travellers' love of Arabia:

British travellers in Arabia are often accused of romantic attitudes about the Arabs. This may well be true of some, but rarely of those who over long periods shared the lives and privations of their Arab companions. Burton, Doughty and Philby were never romantic about them in their writings. Lawrence as a young man at Carchemish may have been but certainly was not by the time he reached Damascus.<sup>170</sup>

Despite Thesiger's denial of 'romanticism' in his attitudes to the Bedouins, the tradition of his hero Lawrence, as we have seen, was in his mind when he came to the Empty Quarter in 1945.

A clue to Thesiger's nostalgia for remote places and nomadic life might be his personal identity. Born not in England but in Africa and away from England for his first nine years, Thesiger was conditioned by this background. Even when he went to

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<sup>167</sup> Asher, *Thesiger*, p. 246.

<sup>168</sup> Thesiger, 'Obituary: Bertram Sidney Thomas', p. 118.

<sup>169</sup> Wilfred Thesiger, 'Desert Borderlands of Oman' *The Geographical Journal*, 116 (1950), pp. 137-171 (p. 137).

<sup>170</sup> Thesiger, *Desert, Marsh and Mountain*, p. 299.



England for schooling, he was unable to 'cope with' contemporary English boys because his stories about what he had seen in Abyssinia were received with 'disbelief and derision', and consequently he 'withdrew' into himself.<sup>171</sup> In his early days Thesiger never had 'intimate' friendships with the Abyssinian servants and had a feeling of 'superiority' over them.<sup>172</sup> However, he would confirm later, during his extensive travels, that he found affinity with different races and colours more than with his countrymen:

Strangely, I have found this comradeship most easily among races other than my own. Perhaps this trait could be traced back to the hurtful rejection I suffered from my contemporaries at preparatory school when I was a small boy freshly arrived from Abyssinia in an alien English world.<sup>173</sup>

Nevertheless, Thesiger's personality is ambivalent. It is difficult to say that he identified himself with a specific culture or race. While he celebrates his Englishness and feels proud of the R.A.F in Oman: 'I was proud to be of their race [...] in many respects no race in the world was their equal', he asserts that he 'would never find contentment among them'. Rather, he sought to find it among the Bedouins, although he 'should never be one of them'.<sup>174</sup> When he came to the Empty Quarter he decided to wear Arab dress in order to avoid some hostile tribes and travel apparently as a Bedouin. Simultaneously, he enjoyed masochistically the difficult circumstances he encountered in his crossing, asserting that his 'fascination of this journey lay not in seeing the country but in seeing it under these conditions'.<sup>175</sup> Likewise, he advocates the British Empire, claiming that no one could provide one example of its 'brutality or oppression',

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<sup>171</sup> Thesiger, *The Life of My Choice*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, p. 167.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, p. 432.

<sup>174</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 163.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, p. 269.

but he, himself, criticizes the Empire, saying: 'I could not forget how easily we ourselves had taken to killing during the war'.<sup>176</sup> Even his picture of the Bedouins whom he idealized for their generosity, bravery and nobility, is not homogeneous. Consider this passage which shows the huge paradox of the Bedouins' characters:

They are difficult to assess, for they are a mass of contradictions. Grasping and avaricious, they will talk unceasingly of money and argue heatedly for days about a dollar: and then slaughter a camel worth a hundred and fifty dollars to feed a stranger. They will always share their food and water, however short, with all comers and with wild improvidence. Petty theft is almost unknown, and you can leave money about with impunity. They will beg unashamedly and try to flatter with a childlike lack of subtlety to gain their ends. They are loyal to each other, their blackest crime being to desert a companion on the road, yet they are without regard of human life, and will cut the throat of an unarmed herdsboy with a jest. Cheerful and amused, they are generally good-tempered, though passionate when roused and quick to resent an insult.<sup>177</sup>

Thesiger's sexuality is another ambivalence in his self-identification. His autobiography and travel writing show, evidently, that his life was a masculine one, in the sense that he was 'more accustomed to the company of men', as he told Justin Marozzi.<sup>178</sup> Not only did he not marry, but also he was a 'misogynist', as Michael Asher claims.<sup>179</sup> Thesiger in his autobiography, consciously or not, gives the reader some clues to his misogyny. From the beginning, in his childhood, he tells us that when his family was in Abyssinia he had hardly met any other English boys; the only two children he saw at that time were those of the British Consul in Addis Ababa 'but they were girls and had no part' in his life. And, when he went to school, St Aubyn's, in England he found himself suddenly in a 'crowd of seventy boys'. There, he experienced difficult circumstances as his headmaster was a 'sadist' unmarried man who used to

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<sup>176</sup> See Naim Attallah's interview with Thesiger, *Speaking for the Oldie*, p.249, and *Arabian Sands*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>177</sup> Wilfred Thesiger, 'Empty Quarter of Arabia', *The Listener*, 38 (1947), 971-972 (p. 972).

<sup>178</sup> Justin Marozzi, 'Plain Water after Cocktail of High Adventure: Lunch with the FT', *Financial Times* (21 November, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>179</sup> Asher, *Thesiger*, p. 14.



beat him and force him to 'kneel naked' by the side of his bed.<sup>180</sup> Similarly, at Eton Thesiger asserts that he experienced the 'most formative influences' in his life.<sup>181</sup> This all-male community would satisfy Thesiger, also, in his study at Oxford. At Magdalen College he chose to read military history, 'a rewarding experience' under a man who 'would tolerate no women undergraduates in his class'.<sup>182</sup> In his old age, when asked if he ever regretted not marrying, he said that he 'had very little sexual interest'.<sup>183</sup> Although Thesiger has denied any sexual interest in men, some critics suggest his homosexuality. Rana Qabbani finds a link between Lawrence and Thesiger, arguing that both of them were 'susceptible to the charms of Eastern boys'.<sup>184</sup> Donna Landry looks to another aspect of Thesiger's 'queerness', arguing that he exhibited what she calls an 'equestrian exhibitionist impulse'. She gives an example of this point, maintaining that Thesiger, when he was among the Marsh Arabs, was excited at the opportunity of 'showing off his prowess on horseback'.<sup>185</sup> Syrine Hout suggests that Thesiger 'relished' the company of young boys throughout his journeys and this is evident from his 'quasi-homoerotic depictions'.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, his inclination for accompanying men and particularly youngsters in his life is manifest—Idris, a fifteen year old who escorted him during his travels through the Sudan, Bin Kabina and Bin Ghabiasha; his adolescent, 'beloved Bedu' companions in the Empty Quarter, Amara, a 'handsome' teenager who was with him for eight years in the Marshes of Iraq; and later his young foster-sons, Lawi, Kabriti and Laputa with whom he settled in Kenya. In fact, Thesiger's photographs of these handsome boys speak much about his homoeroticism.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Thesiger, *The Life of My Choice*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, pp. 68-69.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p.81.

<sup>183</sup> Attallah, *Speaking for the Oldie*, p. 260.

<sup>184</sup> Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, p. 121.

<sup>185</sup> Donna Landry, 'Horsy and Persistently Queer: Imperialism, Feminism and Bestiality' *Textual Practice*, 15, no. 3 (2001), 467-485 (p. 475).

<sup>186</sup> Hout, 'Grains of Utopia', p. 130.

<sup>187</sup> For these photographs see: Wilfred Thesiger, *The Thesiger Collection: A Catalogue of Unique Photographs*, (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 1991).





Figure 8 - Salim bin Ghabisha, Thesiger's close companion in the Empty Quarter 1947





Figure 9- Scenes from the Empty Quarter, pictured by Thesiger in 1945/50





Figure 10 - Wilfred Thesiger disguised in Bedouin dress, 145/1950



Not only this, but he was always fond of taking pictures of naked tribesmen and expressed his love of their nudity: 'I soon accepted the nakedness of these people as perfectly natural, and never gave it a thought except to regret that Christianity, with its roots in Judaism, should so generally equate nakedness with shame, and even regard it as sinful'.<sup>188</sup> Additionally, his 'quasi-homoerotic depictions', as Syrine Hout has suggested, are worthy of looking at in his writing. He describes Bin Kabina, his close Bedouin companion boy, as 'conspicuous in a vivid red loin-cloth, and with his naked shoulders', and he says, elsewhere, that he was 'delighted' to see him 'ragged'.<sup>189</sup> Also, he depicts Bin Kabina's brother, a ten year old Bedouin boy, saying: 'He had large sparkling eyes, very white teeth, and a face as fresh as a half-opened flower'.<sup>190</sup> Perhaps, the most manifest portrait that raises a question about Thesiger's homosexuality is his depiction of Bin Gabisha, another of his close Bedouin escorts, to whom, along with Bin Kabina, he dedicated his *Arabian Sands*:

He had a face of classic beauty, pensive and rather sad in repose, but which lit up when he smiled, like a pool touched by the sun. Antinous must have looked like this, I thought, when Hadrian first saw him in the Phrygian woods. The boy moved with effortless grace, walking as women walk who have carried vessels on their heads since childhood. A stranger might have thought that his smooth, pliant body would never bear the rigours of desert life, but I knew how deceptively enduring were these Bedu boys who looked like girls.<sup>191</sup>

The clue to Thesiger's homosexuality, in this passage, might be related to the mysterious relationship between Hadrian and Antinous. Antinous was a handsome youngster when he first was seen by the Emperor Hadrian, and their sexual liaison seems to have been reciprocal. He became Hadrian's beloved and inseparable

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<sup>188</sup> Thesiger, *The Life of My Choice*, p. 265.

<sup>189</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 64., and 'A Further Journey Across The Empty Quarter', p. 27.

<sup>190</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 173.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, p. 166.

companion sharing his life for a period of several years. However, throughout history the picture of these lovers is perceived heterogeneously, as Royston Lambert argues. Antinous is portrayed either as a 'depraved concubine or as an angelic innocent', while Hadrian is represented as a 'perverted monster or as an elevated idealist'.<sup>192</sup> The ambiguity of Thesiger's sexuality, in spite of his love of adolescent tribesmen, lies in his denial of homosexuality. When asked if he preferred boys, he answered: 'I suppose in a sense, yes. But I am not thinking sexually'.<sup>193</sup> Like a part of the image that represented the association of Hadrian and Antinous, Thesiger, maybe, was to his youthful companions 'an elevated idealist' and his love of them, as Michael Asher argues, could have been 'platonic'.<sup>194</sup>

Both Bertram Tomas and Wilfred Thesiger set out to southern Oman and the Empty Quarter in the first half of the twentieth century. Although they travelled among the same people, their writings reveal different motives, themes and attitudes. Thomas came to the region motivated by the 'desire' to be the first European to cross the 'virgin' Empty Quarter along with an interest in serving his Empire by collecting information about the 'unknown' people of southern Oman. He accomplished what T. E. Lawrence had dreamt, that the 'plum' of exploring the Arabian desert would 'finish' British "knowledge of the earth". Although Thesiger, in a sense, contributed to this project, his personal love of the nomads and nomadic life is more articulated in his travelogue. Taking anthropological measurements of the natives would not have suited his romantic philosophy of exploration. Themes of 'endurance', 'bravery', and 'nobility' are the dominant ideas in *Arabian Sands*, whereas the author of *Arabia Felix* is more interested

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<sup>192</sup> Royston Lambert, *Beloved and God: The Story of Hadrian and Antinous* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), p. 75.

<sup>193</sup> Tyler, 'Private View: The Savage in the Three-Piece Suit', p. 24.

<sup>194</sup> Asher, *Thesiger*, p. 277.



in fauna, flora and ethnography. Consequently, the style of each book is evidently different. *Arabian Sands* is composed in a literary language that depicts desert life as an epic, while *Arabia Felix* is written as a hybrid of science and literature. This is, however, not to suggest that Thomas's work is a mere scientific travelogue; I have given some examples of his interesting descriptions of the Qara mountain and the desert, but his style is not comparable to the flowing language of *Arabian Sands*. Consider this portrait of the Uruq al Shaiba, the highest dune in the Empty Quarter, when Thesiger and his companions were on its summit:

I looked round, seeking instinctively for some escape. There was no limit to my vision. Somewhere in the ultimate distance the sands merged into the sky, but in that infinity of space I could see no living thing, not even a withered plant to give me hope. There is nowhere to go', I thought. 'We cannot go back and our camels will never get up another of these awful dunes. We really are finished.' The silence flowed over me, drowning the voices of my companions and the fidgeting of their camels.<sup>195</sup>

Such dramatic language makes the reader feel as if he were reading a novel rather than a travel book, which may explain why the book was well received and has been translated into a number of languages, including Arabic, French, German and Swedish. Maybe a reason for the stylistic difference between the two books is due to the conditions of composing each of them. *Arabia Felix*, apparently, was written in a hasty way, as Thomas compiled his book immediately after he finished his journey in the Empty Quarter in 1931, because the first edition of the book came out in 1932. Thesiger, however, waited ten years, as has been mentioned, till he was persuaded to begin writing.

The motives of each traveller influenced not only the themes they were interested in and the style they used, but also their attitudes. Thomas came to the desert as a *wazir* accompanied by a servant, and his companions treated him as such. When Thesiger asked the Bedouins about Thomas, though they remembered him as a 'good

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<sup>195</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 133.

companion', they commented on 'his preference of sleeping apart from' them.<sup>196</sup> By contrast, Thesiger joined with his companions in the sands, and he states that he was 'anxious' to behave as they did in order that they might 'accept' him as one of them.<sup>197</sup> If a sense of superiority, possibly, could emerge in the case of Thomas, it is difficult to extend this to Thesiger. He expressed his 'inferiority' comparing himself to his Bedouin companions in terms of their endurance and hospitality. Even when he accomplished his crossing of the Empty Quarter, he told the audience of the Royal Geographical Society, during the ceremony of awarding him the Founder's Medal, that he owed his Bedouins everything: 'You have given me a gold medal for these journeys, but it was they who taught me the little I know of desert travel and without them I should not have gone ten miles'.<sup>198</sup> Finally, the reader of the two books would, simply, find out at the end that Bertram Thomas came to explore the region, while Wilfred Thesiger came to explore himself.

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>198</sup> See: *The Geographical Journal*, 111 (1948), p. 300.



## Chapter V

### Muscat & Oman: Narratives of War and Oil

For nearly a thousand years the Western world has cultivated a distorted vision of Islam which bears little relation to the truth. Even now western media seem intent on prolonging these flawed prejudices. Those of us who served in Oman find ourselves embarrassed by such distortions. When we speak up to counter them, we invariably invite disapproval. When Westerners can learn to welcome Muslims with the same generosity of spirit as Omanis welcome us, a proper respect for each other's culture can follow. Once trust has the opportunity to take root, peaceful enterprise can prevail.<sup>1</sup>

When Wilfred Thesiger was refused permission to explore the interior of Oman in 1950 by Imam Muhammad bin Abdullah al-Khalili, the reason given, as he put it was that, 'if they allowed me to travel there at will I should be followed by other Christians in cars, looking for oil and intending to seize their land'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this suspicion was not so misplaced. The next few pages will show how the discovery of oil shaped the history of Oman in the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1949 Oman and Saudi Arabia disputed over who ruled the oasis of Buraimi, which was a strategic location for the caravan traffic between the Omani interior and the Gulf. The Saudis sought to control Buraimy because the American oil company operation in Saudi Arabia (ARAMCO) was searching for oil in the area, and in 1952 Saudi forces, supported by ARAMCO, occupied the oasis. The Sultan of Muscat, Said bin Taimur, together with the Imam Muhammed Al-Khalili, wanted to expel the Saudis, but the British prevented him in order to avoid a clash with the Americans. In 1954 the Saudis and British signed an agreement for international negotiation, but this could not

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<sup>1</sup> David Gwynne-James, *Letters from Oman: A Snapshot of Feudal Times as Oil Signals Change* (UK: Blackwater Books, 2001), p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 279.

achieve an agreed settlement. A year later the British by force released the oasis, using the Sultan's army and the Trucial Oman Scouts, a force they had established in Sahil Oman to maintain their existence in the region. Prospecting for oil in the interior of Oman brought about a more serious dispute. From the 'Treaty of Sib' in 1920 to the early 1950s, the Sultan of Muscat had authorized the Omani interior to rule itself. When Imam Mohammed passed away in 1954, Ghalib bin Ali, the sheikh of the Bani Hina tribe, in coalition with Suleiman bin Himyar, the 'prince' of the Green Mountain, formed a new Imamate. Ghalib's brother, Talib bin Ali, set up a considerable force in the area and was the chief of the town of Rustaq. This alteration in Imamate Oman happened at the same time that the British-run Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) was dispatching its first oil expeditions into the interior, where the new Imamate resisted them.<sup>3</sup> The attitudes of the new Imamate did not suit the British and the Sultan of Muscat, and they decided the time had come to occupy the Omani interior. In September 1955 they entered Ibri and expelled Talib bin Ali's forces; in October they invaded the town of Rustaq and in December they captured Nizwa. To 'crown' this occupation, Sultan Said bin Taimur drove overland, crossing the desert from Salala to Nizwa to make the first visit to a region that had not been seen by any Sultan of Muscat for a century. The main tribal sheiks of the area, among them Suleiman bin Himyar, came to offer loyalty and make peace with the Sultan. It seemed that the country had unified and that there was no longer an Imamate in the interior. However, this unity did

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<sup>3</sup> The story of oil in Oman goes back to the geological surveys in 1925. Production did not start until 1962, and the first exports were not until 1967. The first oil concession was given in 1925, by the Sultan Taimur bin Faisal to the d'Arcy Exploration Company, which was part of the Anglo Persian Oil Company. Nevertheless, poor results ended the concession after two years. A new contract was granted in 1937 to the Iraq Petroleum Company, which in 1953 adopted the name Petroleum Development (Oman) Ltd (PDO). Oil was discovered in profitable quantities in northern Oman — in Jibal in 1962, in Natih in 1963, and in Fahud in 1964. In the southern area of Oman, Sultan Said bin Taimur in 1952 granted the concession to an American company represented by Wendell Phillips, who transferred it to Dhofar Cities Services Petroleum Company. Several partners took part in the speculation, but because of the general low oil prices, the business enterprise was given up in 1967. By the end of the regime of Said bin Taimur, exploration was strengthened, and oil was discovered in large quantities in the area in the early 1970s. See Mohamed bin Musa al-Yousef, *Oil and the Transformation of Oman 1970-1995: The Socio-Economic Impact* (London: Stacey International, 1995), pp. 28-29.



not last long, as the rebellious Talib bin Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, where he set up a headquarters in Dammam. He also set up in Cairo an 'Imamate of Oman Office' which launched a campaign to argue that the British and the Sultan had occupied a free Arab state. Early in 1957, Talib bin Ali arranged for the smuggling of arms and men into Oman's interior. Later in June 1957, Talib was reunited with his brother, who declared the continuation of the Imamate, and religious forces recaptured Nizwa. In July, all of the main towns of Oman, in addition to the Green Mountain ruled by Sulayman bin Himyar, were raising the white flag of the Imamate again. The Sultan was unable to repress the rebellion, so he sought British support which was ready to act in the late summer. The Sultan considered the action as an insurgence, while the Imam asserted he was resisting British imperialism and fighting to recover the interior's autonomy, which had been endorsed by the 'Treaty of Sib' in 1920.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding that the Imam's movement was supported by the Saudis and the Arab League, in September Nizwa and other major towns were recaptured by the British and the Sultan's forces. Nevertheless, the struggle continued in the Green Mountain until the Sultan's troops and British soldiers from the Special Air Service (SAS), backed by planes from the Royal Air Force (RAF), bombed the plateau to winkle out the rebels from their strongholds. In January 1959, the trio of Imam Ghalib, Talib bin Ali, Sulayman bin Himyar and other rebels escaped to Dammam and Cairo, where they established a government in exile. In Oman, mine-laying, sniping and other rebel activities went on throughout the 1960s. By July 1970, Said bin Taimur had been ousted and flown to England and exile, and a

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<sup>4</sup> In 25<sup>th</sup> of September 1920 the British sponsored an agreement, known as the Treaty of Sib, between Sultan Taimur bin Faisal and Imam Mohammed bin Abdullah Al-Khalili, in which the Sultan in result approved complete independence for the tribes of the Imamate in return for their guarantee not to attack Muscat and the coast. The significance of the treaty is that it brought about a cooling-off period after a seven-years conflict (1913-1920) between the Sultanate and the Imamate in Oman. For the elements of this treaty see: J. E. Peterson, 'The Revival of the Ibadi Imamate in Oman and the Threat to Muscat, 1913-20' *Arabian Studies*, 3 (1976), 165-188. For the cooling-off period between the Sultan Said bin Taimur and the Imam Mohammed bin Abdullah al-Khalili, see Dale F. Eickelman, 'From Theocracy to Monarchy: Authority and Legitimacy in Inner Oman, 1935-1957', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 17, no. 1 (1985), 3-24.

dramatic change in Omani history was initiated by Sultan Qaboos bin Said, saving the country from the 'Middle Ages'.<sup>5</sup>

It was during this turmoil that Edward Henderson, David Gwynne-James and Ian Skeet visited Oman and wrote about the history, manners and customs of the people. Their works are of significance because since the journeys of James Wellsted in 1835, Samuel Miles in 1875 and Percy Cox in 1902, little more had been heard of the interior of Oman. Moreover, the rough policies of Said bin Taimur, as we shall see later, secluded Oman from the entire world; few journalists or travellers saw the country during his reign. The only Europeans who could see it and write about it were those who came with the oil companies, such as Henderson and Skeet, or the British officers, who were employed by the Sultan himself. Despite the fact the travellers of this era had less communication with the natives than their antecedents, maybe because of the nature of their missions, what they wrote about the country is still important, if we take into consideration that even the Omani chroniclers have neglected this period of time.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This historical brief is based on: Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, pp. 281-288, and Landen, *Oman Since 1856*, pp. 421-422. Many writers describe Oman in the post-1970 era as a country that emerged from the 'Middle Ages'. See, for example, Philip Stephen Allfree, *Warlords of Oman* (New York: Modern Literary Editions Publishing Company, 1967), p. 205, Pauline Searle, *Dawn Over Oman* (London: George Allen, 1979), p. 4, and The Duchess of St Albans, *Where Time Stood Still: A Portrait of Oman* (London: Quartet Books, 1980), p. 3. Henderson, Gwynne-James, and Skeet also provide the same perspective, as we shall see later.

<sup>6</sup> The only two Omani historical books that speak of this era, though they represent the Imamate's point of view and are exclusive to the dispute between the Sultan Said bin Taimur and the advocates of the Imamate, were published secretly in the 1960s out of Oman. The first one is *Nahdat al-Aina bi Hurriyat*



## 1. Edward Henderson, 1948

Edward Firth Henderson was born in 1917 in South Africa, but he grew up in Bristol during the 1920s and 1930s. After Bristol he spent three years at Brasenose College, Oxford, studying Modern History and Arabic. At the end of World War II he served, for two years, with the Arab Legion in Jordan under Glubb Pasha, and later he joined the British army in the last days of the British Mandate of Palestine. It was during his service in Palestine that Henderson discovered that British field officers were being deceived at home for political purposes. In 1948, he saw Jewish irregulars use smuggled arms to evict Palestinians from their homes in Haifa while the British army was ordered not to interfere. 'It was the British Government, pressed and bullied latterly by the Americans, who by an administrative process arranged for the occupation of the Arab lands by Jews', says Henderson.<sup>7</sup> On leaving the army in October 1948, he joined the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) and was posted to their headquarters in Bahrain, which held all the land concessions of the Arabian Gulf countries from Qatar to Oman. He then became the representative of the company in Dubai and his job was to make political agreements with the Sheikhs of Trucial States (now the UAE) and Said bin Taimur, the Sultan of what was known as 'Muscat and Oman', in order to make oil exploration possible there. A change from the oil business to the diplomatic service in 1959 sent Henderson to a post as British Political Officer in Abu Dhabi and later in 1960 as Consul for Jerusalem and the West Bank in Jerusalem, where he met and married his wife, Jocelyn. In 1970 he became the first ambassador of the United Kingdom to the recently independent state of Qatar.

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*Oman* by Muhammed Assalimi, published in Cairo with no date, and the other is *Oman Tarikhun Yatakallam* by Assalimi and Naji Assaf, published in Damascus in 1963.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Henderson, *Arabian Destiny: The Complete Autobiography* (Dubai: Motivate, 1999), p. 7.

Upon his retirement from the British Government in 1974, Henderson was invited by Shaikh Zayed to live in Abu Dhabi and help to build an historical archive of the UAE. In 1980 he served, for a year, as director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding (CAABU) in London, and later he travelled to Washington to found American Educational Trust (AET) and to give lectures in the American universities about the Arabs. Edward Henderson passed away in April 1995 at the age of 78.<sup>8</sup>

Henderson's travels in Oman were motivated by oil and politics. His expeditions to different regions in the country were either to survey oil fields or to negotiate with tribal sheikhs in order to make oil exploration possible. One of his trips, for example, took him to the Duru tribe in order to persuade them to follow Said bin Taimur's regime, as he believed that would secure his exploration in the interior of Oman which was held by the Imamate at that time. Another political mission where Henderson succeeded was in liberating Buraimi from the Saudis who invaded this oasis, as previously noted, in 1952, backed by the Americans. He joined the British-Omani expedition as Political Officer, charged to avoid bloodshed.

His visions of Oman and its people, therefore, came within this context of oil and war. He gives this picture of the Omanis after his first journey:

Having seen the Batinah coast and explored some of the valleys inland of Muscat, parts of the Dhahirah plain and the Wadi Jizzi, I was beginning to know something of the Omanis and I came to like them very much. They are sturdy and intelligent and like most hill people, individualists. Their material surroundings were notable for what they lacked. The beautiful, but rugged and harsh scenery, the water and fertile soil of the valley bottoms were their only apparent physical assets. It was fascinating to think that such a lively people who had so little in the way of food or clothing or comforts might suddenly, through our efforts, enjoy the fruits of oil. Most of them had never seen a car or heard a radio; most had never known tinned food; fresh food was severely limited in variety and quantity and they seldom were able to serve meat to their families. The simplest of our possessions were luxuries undreamt of to them; of modern medicine and modern science, they had no knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This outline of Henderson's background is based on his book, *Arabian Destiny* and on Andrew I. Killgore's article, 'In Memoriam: Edward Firth Henderson (1917-1995)', *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (June 1995), pp. 67, 119.

<sup>9</sup> Henderson, *Arabian Destiny*, p. 115.





Figure 11 – Expeditions with Trucks in the 1950s by Edward Henderson.



He justifies his mission to the area with the claim that the poverty and miserable life of the people should make them cooperate with the oil-company expeditions. The same justification led Henderson to criticise the religious rebels in the interior and, therefore, to take part in the war against them, as he believed they were the main obstacle to oil-drilling:

It was becoming apparent how much the people of the whole area disliked Imam Ghalib and his brother Talib; and they evidently were prepared to throw in their lot with the Sultan's central government and hoped for oil and its riches as a consequence. Talib and Ghalib seemed to them to have nothing to offer: no administration, no money and no expertise in regard to oil. Talib's moves about the country with armies were unpopular as the villagers had to feed the troops. Ghalib was accused of being extremely austere and bigoted, whereas the people of Ibri and the neighbourhood, although devout practicing Muslims, were markedly liberal in their attitudes in many ways.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike in the writings of previous travellers, romantic prospects in Henderson's travelogue are very infrequent. One of the unromantic scenes, which are dominant in his book, is this description:

We used to spray our trucks with anti-fly spray soon after leaving Duqm and we knew we should not see another fly until we got back, although there were clouds of them at Duqm itself once our camp had been established, despite our constant efforts to kill them. On such trips we took no tents but allowed ourselves the luxury of either camp beds or air mattresses and, to pitch camp, we simply put these between the stationary vehicles. Our only discomfort was the cold at night and sometimes the mist. One would wake up to misty sunlight to find the person sleeping nearest to you was out of sight in the swirling white clouds of fog and these might not clear until the sun had been up for an hour or more.<sup>11</sup>

It is unsurprising to see the absence of Thesiger's romantic visions in this account, as the men of oil exploration were basically interested in materialistic things. If Thesiger, for example, loathed cars and technology, Henderson used and described them in his journeys:

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 168.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 140.



The journey in those days was of considerable interest as there were then very few vehicles which made this trip. There were no roads, and across the first 40 miles of low sand dunes the going was rough and bumpy. In that particular year, there had been a number of incidents in which the bedouin from the far south had shot up and robbed both car and camel convoys; for this reason traffic was particularly slack, and we met no other vehicle until well inside Muscat territory.<sup>12</sup>

However, Henderson's views about the intrusion of technology in Arabia are inconsistent. While he worked hard to hasten the finding of oil as 'this would bring material development', he agrees with Thesiger that the values of Arabia remained unaffected for hundreds of years 'until our cars broke rudely into this scene'.<sup>13</sup> His position, nevertheless, is moderate and less romantic than Thesiger's. He believes in the significance of 'material progress' in Arabia and he simultaneously craves for a return to 'lost values':

I do not advocate halting progress, and certainly not for a moment delaying the introduction of new amenities to underdeveloped countries. I suppose just by working for an oil company I have in any case done my little bit to 'spoil' acres of beautiful desert and the old life. I am not one to put the brakes on.<sup>14</sup>

Along with some previous travellers, Henderson praised some of the values in Omani society, such as contentment and hospitality. He comments on the people of Buraimi, for instance:

The oasis seemed so remote from modern life and so full of contentment. The fact that no one had much money really did not seem to worry people, and I envied them a way of life I could only share for a short time.<sup>15</sup>

Elsewhere, he asserts that all the Omani villages lived in contentment:

The villages had enough water for drinking, enough very simple food to eat, they were

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 205 and p. 257.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 262.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

simply clothed and their housing was almost primitive, but they had the appearance and atmosphere of content. In the greetings exchanged it was the peace they talked of: "Peace be unto you," "And unto you peace." "What news from your country?" "No news, the land is quiet, the land is untroubled." "Praise be to God".<sup>16</sup>

Although the idea of 'contentment' is associated, negatively, with savages and barbarians in some European travel writing, it is difficult to apply it in the same sense to Henderson's texts.<sup>17</sup> He points out that the natives of Oman enjoyed their simple life despite hardships and war. Also he joined the bulk of British travellers who were impressed by the generosity of the Omanis: 'Like so many visitors to the East, I find that Arab hospitality, Arab manners and their traditional attitude to gifts attractive, and the West may have much to learn from them'.<sup>18</sup>

Another virtue that Henderson praised in the Omanis' manners is their tolerance. This characteristic was admired by most British travellers to Oman; Henderson's remark gives us a new picture of the people of Ibri, who had acquired a bad reputation in the travelogues of previous travellers. At Ibri, Henderson was received kindly by its sheikhs and people. Although he was a Christian, they accommodated him in a mosque. 'This is how they welcomed the first really foreign and non-Muslim group of any size to come to Ibri', he comments.<sup>19</sup>

In writing about oil exploration in a region such as Oman during the 1950s, one should expect much space to be devoted to the reaction of the indigenous people to the arrival of new technology. Henderson did not pay much attention to this point, and provided only a few remarks. At Buraimi, he claims, when some of his geologists

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 202.

<sup>17</sup> For example, the German naturalist and traveller Johann Reinhold Forster, 1729–98, describes the contentment of the 'savage' people with these words: 'This situation of the savage or barbarian, is nothing more than a state of intoxication; his happiness and contentment founded on mere sensuality, is transitory and delusive'. See: Johann Reinhold Forster, *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World on Physical Geography, Natural History and Ethnic Philosophy* (London: G. Robinson, 1778), p. 302.

<sup>18</sup> Henderson, *Arabian Destiny*, p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp. 185–186.



collected samples of rocks and put them into their trucks, the sheikh noticed and enquired what they were doing with them. As Henderson told him that they would be sorted out for microscopic examination and might be sent to London for further tests, the sheikh protested, saying that if they were worth sending to London, they 'must be worth a lot of money'. Henderson comments on this incident:

You may think this sounds absurd, we certainly did, but in all fairness someone with no knowledge of the outside world, only recently introduced to car and radio, and more importantly cut off from his fellows and without friends or advisers, might be excused for such reasoning.<sup>20</sup>

Elsewhere, he records this amazing story from the desert where his troops made an expedition to the Duru lands:

We heard a movement in the bushes and Musallim shouted, giving his name and asking who the person in hiding was. A very scared-looking tribesman eventually emerged, clutching his rifle by the barrel. He said he had been with a party of Duru at the well overnight. Early in the morning they had heard the sound of our engines and at first thought it was the noise of airliners which commonly fly over at a great height. But it soon became evident to them that this was something different, and at last they could see the tall plumes of dust which our trucks were throwing up. All his companions went off on their camels to warn other Duru camping further up the *wadi* to get their families out of the way and to devise some way of attacking the intruders; he had been left behind to hide and to spy upon these strange invaders. To him we might have been creatures from Mars.<sup>21</sup>

Although some scholars might argue that Western writers, sometimes, intended to interpolate ironic stories about the 'other' in order to entertain their readers, these incidents could be true, and Henderson's interpretation of them as lacking knowledge of the outside world seems conceivable. In an isolated country such as Oman prior to 1970, it was quite normal to find some innocent people, who had not seen any cars or heard any radios, astonished or even scared by the sudden arrival of new machines.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp. 57-58.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pp. 154-155.

## 2. David Gwynne-James, 1963

David Gwynne-James was born in 1937 at Pembroke Dock, Wales. From 1957 to 1970, he joined the King's Shropshire Light Infantry. He now runs Gwynne-James Associates, Management Consultants. After finishing the School of Infantry Courses at Hythe and Warminster he served in the British army in Kenya and the Radfan, on the border between Aden and Yemen. He came to Oman in 1963.

Although Gwynne-James's travels in Oman were limited to military missions, his letters give us pictures of places, people and customs in the 1960s. When he arrived Muscat he wrote to Charmian:

Here at last — and what a marvellous place. Mountains, forts, dhows, date palms, oasis communities — and much else besides. And perhaps above all else the people. They are wonderfully friendly. It is most refreshing to be serving in a country, which is 'pro' the Army. I had forgotten that this situation could exist. It goes without saying that this country is hundreds of years behind the times!<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding that the last sentence might imply a comical and critical opinion about the backwardness of Oman at that time, it is clear that the landscape and simple life of the country appealed to Gwynne-James. 'I think I am going to enjoy life here enormously', he continues in the same letter. It is interesting to know that 'primitive' life existed in Oman until 1970, while some neighbouring countries in the Peninsula such as Kuwait and Bahrain had witnessed modernity much earlier. The view that Oman, in this era, was a country living in the 'middle ages', was expressed in many chronicles, as mentioned, and Gwynne-James describes it here as 'hundreds of years behind the times'. He also gives this picture of Ibri:

For Muscat and the Oman, Ibri is quite a large town. Mud huts, houses and forts are partially hidden amongst a mass of palm trees. A falaj or water course runs through the

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<sup>22</sup> Gwynne-James, *Letters from Oman*, p. 63.



centre of the town with a well close at hand. Dusty and “corrugated” tracks lead their way to the market square which is a ‘taxi rank’ for donkeys and camels. Invariably the camels sit right in the middle of the road and merely gaze disdainfully when a Land Rover wishes to pass.

Irony, in Gwynne-James’s texts, plays an essential role in exposing the primitiveness of Oman. The image of camels and donkeys, in Ibri, gazing ‘disdainfully’ at a model of civilization, the Land Rover, might sum up the extent of Oman’s retardation that Gwynne-James wanted to depict. In his text not only the camels or donkeys appear stunned by the newcomers, but also the people:

The inhabitants of Ibri are very friendly. Whenever I or Bernard go to visit the Wali they turn out from their houses and shout greetings to us. The children go mad with excitement so that there is a deafening noise to warn the Wali of our arrival. This is an advantage for he then gets his best coffee set out!

Within the same context of irony, he depicts the woman’s status:

The women folk are unveiled in Ibri but veiled outside the town. They appear to work hard collecting wood, water, food — and have few perks to life. They eat and gather in a separate room from the men, though occasionally they are present in the majlis [meeting place] of a Sheikh ‘s house so you meet them quickly before they retire to leave the men to talk! I wouldn’t know how much influence they have on their menfolk — no doubt quite a lot!<sup>23</sup>

Some critics might argue that these texts imply prejudice or arrogance towards the people of Oman and their culture on the grounds that the writer depicts their life and manners with irony. However, I read them from a different angle. Oman, during the reign of Said bin Taimur, was an isolated region where poverty and ignorance prevailed. This miserable image of the country is not only depicted by Europeans but also acknowledged by the Omanis themselves.<sup>24</sup> Hence, the pictures of ‘mud huts’, ‘dusty

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> One of the well-known Omani intellectuals, Abdullah al-Tai, published in 1963 a novel that criticised severely the regime of Said bin Taimur and its humiliation of the Omani people. The novel, beside its criticism of that era, describes the backwardness of Oman compared to some of its neighbours. See: Abdullah al-Tai, *Malaeikatu Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar* [in Arabic] (Beirut: Al-Wafa Press, 1963).

tracks', 'mad children', overexcited crowds and powerless women in Ibri should be understood within their historical context. For me, the ironic texts of Gwynne-James reveal a critical attitude toward a miserable situation more than any prejudice.

Within the same comic style, Gwynne-James describes some Omani customs.

Like Bertram Thomas, he recounts his experience of the Omani way of sitting:

The local walis and sheikhs invite British officers as honoured guests. As with my visit to the Wahi of Dhank, you are ushered into the majlis [meeting place] where you sit cross-legged on the floor. This I find extremely difficult! My legs are too long or something. It is very rude to show the soles of your feet to your host (you take your shoes off before entering a house). I try to kid myself that I am getting more supple and use a camel stick to help get up again after a long session! The Arabs who are wonderfully supple have considerable amusement in watching the British officers trying vainly to sit comfortably!

In the same letter he provides an important picture of the traditional hospitality in Oman. Bertram Thomas's image of the 'great common mountain of rice' is repeated, here, in more detail:

Very soon huge trays (3 ft in diameter) are brought in mounded high with rice and meat. It is easy to pick out the goat's head which invariably sits snugly on the top. Very often there are other highly coloured tin bowls filled with curry and other types of meat. The feast begins with about six people sitting around one tray. Another tray a few yards of carpet away will have the same number of feasters. The right hand only is used — the left being considered unclean (being reserved for cleaning one's 'private parts'). The sheikh will tear off a choice piece of meat and place it in front of you on the side of the mountain of rice opposite you. This you must eat — regardless of whether it is goat's eye or brains. Otherwise you take a piece of meat, wrap it in rice, squeeze it into a ball of food and eat it. All this procedure is quite simple and takes no time to get used to. The difficult part is the sitting and the conversation! I had my first goat's eye and brains three days ago — the eye was quite reasonable — the brains too sweet! Neither bore thinking about too much. Very often flies are a real menace and hum round the trays of food. In such cases a servant with a fan waves them away.

After everybody has had enough to eat, the trays and tin bowls are removed. Then a servant brings round a kettle of water to clean your hand. He pours water into a bowl while you put your hand under the spout of the kettle. A towel is usually provided. After this a servant brings round very small cups before serving coffee. The servant will wait over you pouring the coffee from an ornate Omani or simpler Saudi Arabian coffee pot — only filling your handle-less cup (finjan) a quarter full. It is usual to take about 3

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cups —no more — and it is quite delicious! To show that you have had enough coffee you jiggle your cup from side to side.<sup>25</sup>

Although eating habits are often perceived, in western travelogues, as signs of the barbaric character of the 'other', Gwynne-James's texts are free from such degradation. They do not reveal, at least, the sense of 'cultural superiority' that Tim Youngs found in British travel narratives on Africa. Youngs is convinced that British travellers' descriptions of Africans eating 'are flavoured with a patronising amusement or tainted with disgust'.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, Gwynne-James's account of Omani manners shows some cultural encounters. We have seen in the passage above that he was impressed by the natives' hospitality, and elsewhere he states that he was often welcomed by the tribal sheikhs and feasted with more goat, rice, dates, *halwa* and coffee to the extent that, once, he 'could hardly stand up and walk away when the meal was finished'.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, when some sheikhs paid him a visit in his camp he became furious and attacked their behaviour:

I wouldn't trust him further than I could throw him. I have seldom seen such an evil bloated face. Who am I talking about? A visiting sheikh who has just left the camp! I would have loved to have seen your reaction to him. Even more expressive — probably! In Rostaq these sheikhs continually visit the camp — more often than not on the scrounge. What makes me smile is the way they lead up to their request saying all manner of good things (quite untrue) about the Army, probably whispering a piece of information (at least a week old) in confidence to you — and then — only then — asking for two gallons of petrol for their Land Rover. This is just what has happened.

This one had a particularly nasty glint in his eye. Unfortunately it is part of the Army's policy to be polite to these scroungers or I should be infinitely less tolerant. He even asked for ice in his drink — obviously having been treated to some here before. I saw his evil eye alight on the fridge (which does not work in this heat) and blatantly ask that his orange squash be filled with ice. I believe this was his only reason for coming over to the mess instead of talking to the Local Officer (Omani) in his tent. Please do not think this is bitter talk — it is unquestionably true.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Gwynne-James, *Letters from Oman*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>26</sup> Tim Youngs, *Travellers in Africa: British Travelogues, 1850-1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Gwynne-James, *Letters from Oman*, p. 87.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 102.

What is 'true' is that Gwynne-James, and Bertram Thomas, who did not tolerate the 'intrusion' of his Bedouins, did not realize the nature of the natives' manners. It was a local custom in Oman that people dealt with each other reciprocally; when they welcomed you kindly and openly they expected you to do the same thing. There was a difference, therefore, between two cultures: the first one sustained the traditional concept of hospitality; 'open-handedness' and 'unselfishness', while the other was not used to this kind of hospitality. New civilization had influenced the 'traditional values' throughout the West. The 'decline' of open hospitality in England, for example, has been mentioned by British travellers who set out for the East and some recent scholars. We have seen in this study how Wilfred Thesiger and Edward Henderson, for instance, celebrated the 'lavish hospitality' of the Arabs and compared it with their own. Similarly, Felicity Heal, in her study of the notion of hospitality during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England, argues that 'economic upheavals' have played a vital role 'not only in temporarily threatening the giving associated with hospitality, but in demonstrating conclusively that it was a recessive trait when compared with the commodity mentality long established among the English'.<sup>29</sup> However, this is not to suggest that British are no longer generous; rather, it explains the social change and its influence on some British travellers' representations of the Omani culture.

Another aspect of cultural encounters in Gwynne-James's writing is his image of the Omanis' sense of time:

Time, as I have said often before, means nothing to the Omanis. We lay on trucks to collect them from their villages and houses dotted all over the country. We attempt to make the process not too long and drawn out by asking them to be near the track used at a certain time, allowing plenty of time for all previous stops. Not having enough British officers or indeed local officers to roust them out, one is forced to send a sergeant or corporal. What happens? The soldiers are not ready when required so to avoid further delay the truck is driven to the house. As hospitality is the byword in Oman, the sergeant is bidden in for coffee or a meal. Meanwhile all the others who have already

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<sup>29</sup> She also concludes that 'open hospitality was something the English always approved with their lips rather than practiced in their lives'. See Heal Felicity, *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 401-402.



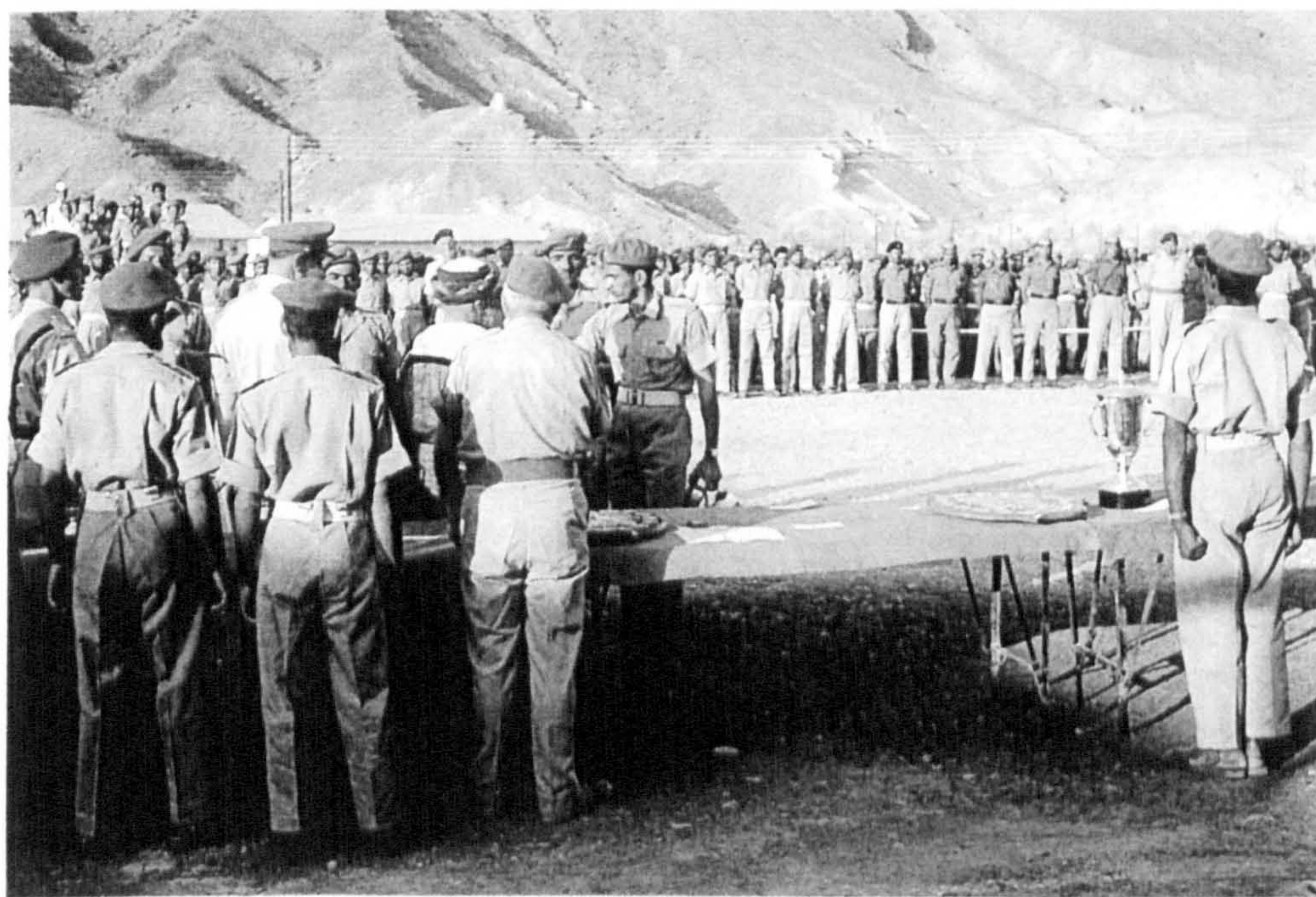


Figure 12 – Military training centre in Oman pictured by Gwynn-James in the 1960s



been picked up are invited to other nearby houses. And this happens in every village! Whereas this is really very pleasant it does mean that the hospitality time far outlasts the travel time despite the long distances between villages. Also it is very difficult to gauge when a truck is overdue just because of an extra fudhl [party or gathering for a meal] or whether it has broken down or perhaps even been blown up on a mine. On an average out here, you need to allow very nearly 4 times the length of time that you might expect to take to do most jobs in England, Germany, Kenya or any other country under Western influence. As you can imagine I am rapidly becoming more patient and also more tolerant.<sup>30</sup>

If he had the right to suggest that the people of Oman, in that era, lacked the Western conception of time which was brought about by the Industrial Revolution, it is difficult to accept his sweeping generalization that 'time means nothing to Omanis'. The Western concepts of 'punctuality' or 'time-thrift', were probably absent in a pre-modern country such as Oman in the 1960s, but this does not mean that the Omanis lacked a sense of time, because they had their own time consciousness. In their own terms they were a punctual people as they, for example, witnessed their five daily prayers. Moreover, time meant a lot to them in terms of their nomadic way of life. One good example as an indicator of the Omanis' consciousness of time is their particular system of distributing *falaj* or the underground water channel, where the absence of Western clocks did not prevent them from measuring time by their own means, as they used sundials in the daytime and celestial bodies at night.<sup>31</sup>

Gwynne-James's letter to his future wife dated 28, March, 1963 is significant, as it sums up his attitudes toward the Omanis.<sup>32</sup> He describes their 'shyness' and 'warm greeting':

I want to give you my impressions of the Omani. I suspect that you may know most of this already, but some of my early impressions may have been wide of the mark.

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<sup>30</sup> Gwynne-James, *Letters from Oman*, p. 88.

<sup>31</sup> The full story of this system is available in: J. C. Wilkinson, *Water and Tribal Settlement in South-East Arabia: A Study of the Aflaj of Oman* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), pp. 102-121.

<sup>32</sup> Gwynne-James, *Letters from Oman*, pp. 82-84.



The Omani on meeting him for the first time is a shy, extremely well mannered person. As previously described, every conceivable form of introduction is used — but depending on his attentiveness or otherwise, can be either charming or a meaningless rigmarole.

In time the initial shyness gives way and the Omani greets you warmly, looking you straight in the eyes..... I have sometimes found this warm friendly greeting almost disconcerting in its apparent sincerity. My experience so far has led me to use the word 'apparent' — for two reasons. Firstly, there are a number of Omanis who are undeniably charming, but not wholly trustworthy. Secondly the lack of western materialistic way of life does dictate that the meeting, greeting and social life of the Omani is of paramount importance. It is a perfected art.

What is obvious, here, is that Gwynne-James could not make up his mind about his picture of the Omani. There is no a stable interpretation in his text, for the natives' behaviour appeared to him either as 'charming' or 'meaningless rigmarole'. He liked their 'warm friendly greeting' and simultaneously he found them 'not wholly trustworthy'. This hesitation could be attributed to the length of his stay in Oman, which was only one year and a half, and to the kind of people whom he encountered. His military mission would have not let him meet different classes of Omanis. Thus, it should be understood that his observations were limited to some soldiers and tribal sheikhs. What is interesting here is his remark on 'trustworthiness'. It is ironic that a British officer, whose military mission was to fight against some Omani rebels in the 1960s, would criticise some natives as being 'not wholly trustworthy'. He might have realised that some of the local soldiers, whom he recruited and trained, might have had hidden sympathies with their countrymen 'rebels' and would, therefore, have looked at him as a 'coloniser', not as a guest. Hence, the question of their 'trustworthiness' would be rendered meaningless.

In the same letter, he continues describing Omanis' manners:

Generally speaking Omanis are poorly co-ordinated where sport is concerned. This, together with some degree of laziness, means that they show little interest in any game. However they can walk incredibly long distances in the heat of the day with little effect save recurring headaches.

Elsewhere, he gives us an example of this 'un-coordination'. He claims that he tried to teach them hockey but they were 'unbelievably uncoordinated'. Here, his picture of them is ironic:

Trying to explain the finer points of the game is no mean task for they ALL want to strike the ball at the same time so that they ALL move about the ground—22 of them in 10 sq yds—just like a flight of sand grouse. However my efforts are not being entirely wasted for they now stay in their positions but I'm afraid that once I have gone they will ALL swoop on the ball once more!<sup>33</sup>

Again and again, Gwynne-James's observations refer to the local soldiers whom he met.<sup>34</sup> It is difficult to accept his sweeping statement, above, that 'Omanis are poorly co-ordinated'. Furthermore, one cannot help but put these texts in their historical context. As I have mentioned previously, Oman was at that time a pre-modern society, and most of the people were, certainly, unacquainted with sports such as hockey.

Another picture he provides is this account of the Omanis' way of thinking:

The Omani is prone to mood swings. Small instances can make him uncontrollably happy and excited whereas the next moment he can plunge into the depths of depression. I am beginning to fathom the type of thing which affects him in this way. His mind seems to act in the present only. He seldom seems to reminisce or talk of past experiences — although he is a great discussor of the 'latest news'. As for looking into the future, this really does seem to be an effort for him. He has little comprehension of the abstract. He drives on in his Land Rover — runs out of petrol — and only then does he see the problem. He finds it difficult to forecast such simple problems and to prepare himself accordingly.

The idea that the Arab mind is polarized between two contrasting extremes is stereotyped in western discourse. Several travellers to Arabia have pictured Arabs as initially prone to dichotomise everything between 'white' and 'black', 'honour' and 'shame', 'generosity' and 'meanness', etc. Richard Burton, for instance, talked about

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> David Smiley, who was Commander of all the Forces of Said bin Taimur in the late 1950s, confirms that 'Almost all the troops, Arabs and Baluch, were illiterate and had to sign for their pay with their thumb marks'. See: David Smiley, *Arabian Assignment* (London: Leo Cooper, 1975), p. 24.



the 'unsettled habits of mind', which characterised the Arabs and caused their 'melancholy temperament'. He also attributed this kind of mood to 'overworking the brain' in a hot dry atmosphere.<sup>35</sup> T. E. Lawrence was more overt: 'This people was black and white, not only in vision, but by inmost furnishing: black and white not merely in clarity, but in apposition. Their thoughts were at ease only in extremes'.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, we have seen in the previous chapter how Wilfred Thesiger found it difficult to assess his Bedouins in the Empty Quarter, as they were a 'mass of contradictions'.

The idea that the Arab mentality is limited to the present and has no appreciation of future is not infrequent in Western writings. Many travellers to Arabia portrayed Arabs as 'improvident'. One of the earliest texts to deal with this image is Alexander Kinglake's *Eothen*. Here, his picture of the Arab mind is manifest:

I know of no human being whose body is so thoroughly the slave of mind as the Arab. His mental anxieties seem to be forever torturing every nerve and fiber of his body, and yet, with all this exquisite sensitiveness to the suggestion of the mind, he is grossly improvident.

Kinglake was not living in the age of the Land Rover as Gwynne-James was, and his example of this 'improvidence', of course, was camels. He claimed that when he was in the desert, his Arabs, in order to reduce the burden of their camels, insisted that they should not take more than two days' supply of water, arguing that some wells in front of them would be enough for the rest of the journey. But, he continues, they found no water afterwards, and they would have perished if his servants had not taken 'precaution' and had some water with them.<sup>37</sup> This claimed 'improvidence' of Arabs has sometimes been associated with the Islamic concept of predestination. Edward Lane, for example, believed that fatalism 'renders the Muslim utterly devoid of

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<sup>35</sup> Burton, *Personal Narrative*, I, p. 299.

<sup>36</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 36.

<sup>37</sup> Kinglake, *Eothen*, pp. 235-236.

presumption with regard to his future actions or to any future events'.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, one cannot help but argue that European travellers misunderstood the Islamic concept of destiny. The Koran has statements meant to prevent Muslims from getting stuck in the present, encouraging them always to work and consider their future circumstances.<sup>39</sup> However, this is not to suggest that Gwynne-James's remarks on the Omanis' indifference to the future is wholly false, but rather to clarify his tendency to sweeping generalizations in sentences such as: 'His mind seems to act in the present only'. Here, one can provide some examples from Omani culture to show that the people were not void of a sense of providence and consideration of the future. Many Omani proverbs, for instance, articulate that man should not rely on his current situation but make plans for the future. One of these proverbs states overtly, 'Take sufficient provisions till you reach the town or country', in the sense of making necessary preparations. Another proverb affirms, 'A club and a waist-wrapper, and the Lord is the provider!', criticising an improvident person who does not care or trouble himself about earning his livelihood.<sup>40</sup>

Having dealt with the 'shortcomings' of the Omani, Gwynne-James went on to 'sing his praises'. In chapter nine 'Memories without Letters', he provides a vivid picture of the 'tolerance' virtue of the Omanis:

Looking back to the early 'sixties, we were indeed privileged to be Christian soldiers in a Muslim world. Not only were we able to acquire some understanding of Omani Muslim culture but in spite of our Christianity, we were made to feel welcome in their

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<sup>38</sup> Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs*, p. 285.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, these verses from *The Koran*, trans. by J. M. Rodwell (London: Everyman, first published in 1909, 1997): 'Say: work ye: but God will behold your work, and so will His Apostle, and the faithful' (p. 128), 'I will not suffer the work of him among you that worketh, whether of male or female, to be lost' (p. 48), 'And when the Prayer is ended, then disperse yourselves abroad and go in quest of the bounties of God' (p. 380).

<sup>40</sup> The second proverb needs some explanation. In Oman, it is customary that a man wears a waist-wrapper or a dagger and takes in his hand a club for dressing up, especially in public ceremonies. The proverb, therefore, ironically describes and criticises a man who seeks only to be good-looking but does not work for his earning, leaving everything to Allah. For more details see: A. S. G. Jayakar, *Omani Proverbs* (Cambridge: The Oleander Press, 1987), p. 39 and p. 48.



midst. Providing we respected their Islamic culture — and we had been well briefed on this beforehand — we were accepted without hesitation and with good grace. Our abiding impression of Omanis was of a people who were devoid of prejudice, intrigued by our presence and who genuinely wanted to like us.

This testimony is significant; it discharges the natives of Oman from ‘prejudice’ and religious fanaticism, while the image of Arabs and Muslims in the west is stereotyped and associated with ‘terrorism’. Gwynne-James not only contributes, with other travellers such as Thesiger and Henderson, to dispelling this ‘distorted vision’ of Muslims, but also he criticises the West for ‘cultivating’ it, as we have seen in the passage quoted at the front of this chapter. Here, in this passage he clarifies his argument:

Although few if any of us thought to analyse it at the time this generosity of spirit was rather remarkable in the context of medieval history. After all as a nation we had played a leading role in instigating a series of brutal holy wars against the Muslims of the Near East. Subsequently most Christian scholars depicted Islam as a violent and intolerant faith. In contrast to this trend, longstanding historical relationships between Britain and Muscat had helped to reduce such prejudice.<sup>41</sup>

Many travellers to Oman have criticised some vices of their own societies, as we have seen in this study, but none of them has done so more overtly than Gwynn-James in this text and the epigraph of this chapter. Not only does he accept the idea that the West for a long time has ‘distorted’ the image of Islam, but also he considers his years in Oman as a paradigm of mutual respect and ‘peaceful enterprise’ between East and West.

### 3. Ian Skeet, 1966

There are two main themes in Skeet’s work: an account of Sultan Said bin Taimur’s regime and a description of most of the provinces in Oman. The content of the book

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<sup>41</sup> Gwynne-James, *Letters From Oman*, pp. 145-146.

reflects, overtly, what the geography and topography of Oman looked like before 1970. The geopolitical term 'Muscat and Oman', from which derives the name of the book, had its significance in Omani history during the 1950s and 1960s, as mentioned previously. Skeet divides his descriptions of the country into two different regions: Muscat, including the capital, Muttrah, Batinah and the coast from Muscat to Ras al Had, and Oman including the Interior, Sharquiya, Dhahira and Desert. In his description of the country, Skeet draws largely upon his travels and his reading of accounts by previous travellers to Oman.

To understand Oman in this era it is essential, first, to know Said bin Taimur himself, as Ian Skeet asserts.<sup>42</sup> The final chapter of *Muscat and Oman* is devoted to a description of the regime of this 'unlamented Sultan', to borrow J. C. Wilkinson's words, who sealed off the country from the outside world for 36 years.<sup>43</sup> Skeet, in short, depicts the Sultan as a 'pigheaded' tyrant. He believes that the psychological 'syndrome' of Said bin Taimur was his principle of 'non-delegation', which made him over the years cease to have any trust in people. His picture of him as an 'English Victorian' is worth quoting:

So, I think of the Sultan as the epitome of an English Victorian paterfamilias, rigid, upright, uncomplicatedly confident that only he knows what to do at what time in the best interests of his family, steering his people, like children, along the path ordained for them. What worries me, and many other people too, is that in 1968, even if Victoriana is in, the Victorian moral code is way out.<sup>44</sup>

Beside this 'pigheadedness' of the Sultan, Skeet provides many examples of the miserable situation of Oman during his reign. Said bin Taimur's profound distrust of

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<sup>42</sup> Ian Skeet, *Muscat and Oman: The End of an Era* (London: Travel Book Club, 1975), p. 163. It is strange that Skeet puts his picture of the Sultan at the end of the book, although he describes him as the 'arbiter of present and future in the sultanate'.

<sup>43</sup> J. C. Wilkinson, 'Ian Skeet: Muscat and Oman: The End of an Era', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 38, 1 (1975), pp. 155-156 (p. 156). Wilkinson claims that he went to Oman just before Skeet, and confirms that Skeet's account of Said bin Taimur is 'exact' and 'wholly convincing'.

<sup>44</sup> Skeet, *Muscat and Oman*, p. 168.



development encompassed the whole of life in Oman: education, hygiene, justice and freedom. 'The history of education in the Sultanate is a sorry tale', Skeet asserts. Three primary schools were the 'sum total' of education in the country. The best of them, the Saidyya established in 1940, looked in 1968 to have a 'permanent sullenness', its windows 'cracked and broken and thick with dust'. Here, Skeet sums up the situation of education in Oman:

Such is the potential of state education in the Sultanate: a maximum of 640 boys up to a standard that with the best will in the world can be claimed to be little more than primary. And private schools are rigorously controlled, to the extent that they are hardly permitted at all; so the Omani boy must seek his further education elsewhere.<sup>45</sup>

The Sultan's philosophy of education was one of the odd things that shocked many writers of his era. Skeet tells us that 'what the Sultan fears most is education' because he thought that 'education leads to trouble'. Teachers, he argues, were the origin of the problem. Since the Omanis were not qualified to teach, the only source of teachers was the Arab world, either Palestinians or Egyptians, but such people were 'anathema' to the Sultan, as he looked on them as a 'rabid collection of revolutionary socialist nationalists'.<sup>46</sup> On one occasion when his adviser, Hugh Boustead, tried to convince him to set up primary schools to educate the sons of tribal chieftains and Provincial Governors, who in the future would be able to take part in the government, he said to him cynically: 'That is why you lost India, because you educated the people'.<sup>47</sup> Fred Halliday claims that before the Sultan was overthrown in 1970, he had decided to close the only three primary schools in the country, as they had become 'centres of communism'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, pp. 29-30, and p. 183.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, pp. 183-184.

<sup>47</sup> Hough Boustead, *The Wind of Morning* (California: Craven Street Books, 2002), p. 223.

<sup>48</sup> Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, p. 276.

Hygienic status was no better. Skeet tells us that the only hospital in the country was the Muttrah Mission Hospital, run by the Arabian Mission of the Dutch Reformed Church in America.<sup>49</sup> He gives this pathetic image of the health situation during Said bin Taimur's regime:

More and more medicine is badly needed in all the country of Oman, where the diseases of poverty are endemic; but this is evident enough even from Muscat and Muttrah where limbs are wizened and sometimes stunted beyond repair, and the eyes of children are already gummed with trachoma, and there are plenty of older men being led through the dangerous streets, quite blind. Nor can one repress a shudder when one sees clanking heavily along in chains outside the hospital itself a mindless, but presumably dangerous also, idiot man.<sup>50</sup>

Skeet's remarks on the miserable hygiene of Oman are not exaggerated. Jan Morris, who accompanied the Sultan on behalf of *The Times* in 1955, during the journey the Sultan made from Dhufar to Muscat in order to suppress the rebellion of the interior, asserts that 'there was scarcely a doctor in the whole of the Sultanate, and everywhere men peered at you with eyes distorted and watering from trachoma'.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, David Holden, the correspondent of *The Times*, visited the country in 1957 and wrote:

In the villages of Oman there is often not a single healthy inhabitant insight. Trachoma, tuberculosis, malaria, rheumatism and decaying teeth, on top of years of self-imposed in-breeding and involuntary under-feeding, have made the Omanis as poor an advertisement for the life of the noble savage as any I have seen.<sup>52</sup>

The Sultan's philosophy of health was no less strange than that of education. He once told his Forces Commander David Smiley:

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<sup>49</sup> Of course, this hospital was quite known throughout Oman, and, interestingly, the people used to call it 'Mercy Hospital'.

<sup>50</sup> Skeet, *Muscat and Oman*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>51</sup> Jan Morris, *Sultan in Oman* (London: Sickle Moon Books, 2000), p. 153. This book was published, first, in 1957 by Faber and Faber for 'James Morris', the previous name of the author before having sex-change operation in 1972.

<sup>52</sup> David Holden, *Farewell to Arabia* (New York: Walker and Company, 1966), p. 236.



We do not need hospitals here. This is a very poor country which can only support a small population. At present many children die in infancy and so the population does not increase. If we build clinics many more will survive—but for what? To starve?.<sup>53</sup>

Another example that Skeet provides of the miserable regime of Said bin Taimur is the issue of justice. By any standard, he argues, the Sultan's treatment of political prisoners in al-Jalali gaol was 'absolutely inhuman and inexcusable'.<sup>54</sup> If Skeet's account of this dreaded prison is short, perhaps because he was not allowed to go inside it, David Smiley, who visited al-Jalali regularly, provided this horrible picture:

Even from a distance Jalali looked a grim and evil place; its sheer granite walls, flanked by two formidable round towers, stood on the summit of a huge rock, accessible only across a narrow causeway and up a long, steep flight of steps cut in the cliff face. Inside, it was horrible. Here the Sultan kept his prisoners, nearly a hundred of them, criminals and political offenders or suspects... Both categories were shackled, the fetters round their ankles connected by a heavy iron bar. When any of them had to go outside to relieve himself he lifted the bar by a piece of cord to take some of the weight off his feet; but most of the time they lay on the hard stone floors of their long barrack rooms, without mattresses or even straw to rest on. A silent, gloomy gaoler looked after them, and soldiers of the Muscat Regiment mounted a reluctant guard; the only Europeans allowed inside were the guard commander, Waterfield, and myself. Worse than the discomfort and the miserable diet was their lack of water... whenever I visited them—a regular part of my duties—they would crowd round me, trailing their shackles and gasping piteously, 'water, Sahib, water!'.<sup>55</sup>

Philip Allfree, one of the Muscat Regiment's officers, who managed to visit this prison in the late 1950s, provided a similar picture, saying: 'I had no wish to repeat my excursion; I felt physically depressed and mentally sick'.<sup>56</sup> It was greatly appreciated, therefore, by all Omanis when Sultan Qaboos in 1970 took over power and freed most of the prisoners from this 'veritable hellhole'.

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<sup>53</sup> Smiley, *Arabian Assignment*, pp.40-41.

<sup>54</sup> Skeet, *Muscat and Oman*, pp. 176-177. Al-Jalali is a fort built in 1578 by the Portuguese, who invaded Oman in the beginning of the sixteenth century.

<sup>55</sup> Smiley, *Arabian Assignment*, p. 29.

<sup>56</sup> Allfree, *Warlords of Oman*, pp. 174-175.

In addition to these miserable circumstances of education, hygiene and justice, the Omanis suffered from Said bin Taimur's restrictions. Ian Skeet admits that the most 'recurrent' word in his text about Oman is 'restrictions', but he asserts there is no escape from this subject when dealing with Said bin Taimur, whose 'predilection for rules and regulations' made the people so enraged by him and his regime. We are told by Skeet that some of the Sultan's 'vicious' restrictions that annoyed people and arrested Omani development were rules such as the veto on importing vehicles, the law that prohibited a wife to go with her husband abroad without permission from the Sultan himself, and, most terrible of all, the law preventing Omanis who wished to return from abroad to work in their own country.<sup>57</sup> Elsewhere, Skeet provides this passage describing the curbs imposed upon people in Muscat:

The town is still walled, and has only three gates: one, the Bab Saghir, for pedestrians and donkeys; the main gate, the Bab Kebir, for traffic up to about 15 cwt. capacity; and a third, the Bab Mathaib, for larger vehicles, which are only permitted to be driven between Muttrah and Muscat, and into the town of Muscat, with special dispensation, most infrequently granted. The Bab Kebir, rebuilt and presented to the town by the present Sultan ...is shut three hours after sunset, after which time vehicles may only be driven in or out with written permission from the Governor of the Capital. If you walk within the city walls after this time, you must carry a lantern (powered by paraffin)—even if you merely get out of your car. To remind you of the time and the guards of their duty, a drum is irregularly beaten from the top of Fort Merani for about twenty minutes before the moment when, on the stroke of sunset plus three hours, three explosions (to take the place of the cannon shots that used to be fired) resound round the town. The gates clang to, lanterns are lit, and the guards search for offenders in the shadows. The ritual of dum-dum is over for another night.<sup>58</sup>

Edward Henderson who visited Muscat in the early 1950s found the same 'curious and maddening rules', in which Europeans were not permitted out at night unless escorted by an Omani carrying a lamp; particular authorization was required to drive a car inside the walls; smoking was prohibited in the main streets; and no musical instruments, or

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<sup>57</sup>Skeet, *Muscat and Oman*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, pp. 22-23.



radios, were permitted to be played anywhere in public.<sup>59</sup> This policy of rules was not limited to Muscat, but applied wherever the Sultan lived. Jan Morris found similar restrictions in Salala, the second stronghold of the Sultan: 'You must not smoke in public, for tobacco was forbidden by the pious Sultan' and 'if you wanted to take photographs, you must do so from inside your car'.<sup>60</sup>

For all these reasons, it was not improbable that the Sultan sealed off the country and hid it from the entire world. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the only travellers who visited Oman during Said's reign were either men for oil companies or officers employed by the Sultan. Ian Skeet tells us that there was a 'rigorous entry visa regime supervised in person by the Sultan'. Journalists were 'anathema', and few of them were allowed in; even these were condemned for what they wrote and banned from coming back to the country. 'He appears to consider completely and utterly irrelevant what anyone thinks of him', says Skeet.<sup>61</sup> It was not only journalists that the Sultan detested, for very few people, Arab or European, were welcomed into his confidence. Even the British government, which supported him, militarily and financially, during his reign, was treated with distrust. The Sultan's 'Victorian nature', suggested by Ian Skeet, is explained here by David Holden:

Characteristically, he has chosen to live in virtual exile within his own kingdom, cut off both from his officials and his people. He seldom visits Muscat and never stays there except in an emergency... The Sultan prefers the cooler comforts of Salalah, a tiny and dilapidated settlement in the province of Dhofar, 500 miles away, where he can look out from the windows of another palace upon the rollers of the Indian Ocean, swelling grandly from the southern horizon to break upon a long, white beach. Here, surrounded by a mere handful of his subjects and separated from the rest by the desert of the Empty

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<sup>59</sup> Henderson, *Arabian Destiny*, p. 48.

<sup>60</sup> Morris, *Sultan in Oman*, p. 31. Prohibiting smoking was not a matter of piousness, as Morris thought, but, rather, it was a matter of 'predilection for rules and regulations', as Skeet suggested. In this connection, Neil McLeod Innes, The Sultan's Minister of Foreign and External Affairs from 1953-1958, mentioned in his autobiography that Sultan Said in his exile in England after 1970, 'mellowed' and used to smoke on the grounds that "when in another country, one should accept its customs". See Neil McLeod Innes, *Minister in Oman* (Cambridge: The Oleander Press, 1987), p. 282.

<sup>61</sup> Skeet, *Muscat and Oman*, pp. 177-178.

Quarter, he is sheltered from the interruptions and importunings that might disturb his life in Muscat. Like Queen Victoria in retreat at Balmoral, he has turned his back upon the world.<sup>62</sup>

Consequently, it is not surprising that the pictures of most of the Omani towns and villages that Ian Skeet describes in his book are gloomy and melancholy. Muscat, which appeared as the 'most picturesque' place in the world to some travellers in the past, seemed to Skeet in the late 1960s like 'a warren of crumbling walls, rubble, flaking plaster, pad-locked wooden doorways, rickety wooden staircases, barred windows and dusty paths'.<sup>63</sup> Muttrah, a small town near Muscat, was no less depressing:

It is a dirty town, with pools or rivulets of filth all about it; unhealthy from too many people, no sanitation, too little water, too much poverty. If you drive through the empty town on a summer night, the stale stench of the day hangs over the streets like a noxious mist; and then you see that the street is not empty, but lined with the corpses of sleeping persons, seeking in the open a dilution of the town's semi-solid supply of air. In the winter it is not so bad, but still the foxes slink out of the hills to scavenge round the town.<sup>64</sup>

Another image, outside of Muscat, is Skeet's description of the towns of the Batinah coast. They were all similar, he suggests: 'a beach with discoloured sand', 'a rim of burasti [palm-frond] and mud huts', and 'a small suq, with some camels and donkeys'.<sup>65</sup> In the eastern area, he found the town of Sur in the same miserable conditions; its beach was a 'wide shallow curve of dirty sand', and the bay was full of 'dogs scattered like crabs' and 'hordes of flies'.<sup>66</sup> Arguably, most of these images of Omani towns overlap with those provided by previous travellers in the nineteenth century. However, it is inconceivable that the same picture, if not worse, remained until 1970 whilst some

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<sup>62</sup> Holden, *Farewell to Arabia*, p. 219.

<sup>63</sup> Skeet, *Muscat and Oman*, p. 23.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 81.



neighbouring regions such as Dubai, Bahrain, Iraq and Kuwait were much better off than Oman at that time; hence they became a refuge to many Omanis who fled the country during Said bin Taimur's reign.

Edward Henderson, David Gwynne-James and Ian Skeet are different not only in the years they visited Oman but also in their missions, subjects and style of writing. While Henderson came to the country motivated by oil prospecting and a diplomatic mission, Gwynne-James was a British officer who served with the Sultan of Muscat's Armed Forces, and Skeet came to serve with the British-run oil company PDO. The themes of their writing are also diverse. Henderson was concerned with describing his oil expeditions in Oman, telling about reactions of the natives toward the arrival of the new technology and the consequences of petroleum in the region. Gwynne-James, however, was interested in the manners and customs of Omanis, whereas Skeet focuses on depicting Said bin Taimur's regime and its affect on the life of the people. The differences between the three writers extend to their technique of writing. *Arabian Destiny* is written in a narrative style, in which the events are told through stories that include characters, times and places. It is an autobiographical account of the author's experiences in Oman. Gwynne-James's work, however, consists of letters sent by the author to his future wife in the early 1960s. He reports he did not think of turning them into a book until after 1965, when he got married and discovered that his wife had transposed his letters 'suitably edited into a hardback exercise book'.<sup>67</sup> What characterises Gwynne-James's style is his tendency to irony which, as I have mentioned, he uses to criticise some manners and aspects of life in Oman. Skeet's writing style is an amalgam of narrative and documentation. Unlike Henderson and Gwynne-James, Skeet did not rely only on his own observations, but also consulted

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<sup>67</sup> Gwynne-James, *Letters from Oman*, p. 6.

numerous travel writings on Oman.<sup>68</sup> Before he describes any town or city in the country, he draws upon the previous travellers who had visited that place. Travel accounts from the eighteenth century to his time have been cited in his work.

Despite this diversity among the three travellers, the trio are in agreement on one major issue. They share the idea that 'Muscat and Oman' was in the 'Middle Ages' or 'hundreds of years behind the times' during the reign of Said bin Taimur and the Imamate.

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<sup>68</sup> For instance, he quotes some travellers who visited Oman in the past such as William Francklin (p. 22), Theodore Bent (p. 26), James Baillie Fraser (p. 56), Percy Cox (p. 60), Samuel Miles (p.75), Marco Polo (p. 76), Bertram Thomas (p. 87), James Wellsted (p. 143) and Wilfred Thesiger (p. 148).



## Chapter VI

### Final Remarks and Recommendations

British travel writing from 1800 to 1970 offers diverse pictures of Oman as a place, people and culture. The methods that travellers employed to represent Oman are also heterogeneous and discontinuous.

The diversity of Oman's geography is reflected in the travellers' images of the country. The 'barren, rocky hills' of Muscat, for instance, are contrasted with the image of 'Arabia Felix' in the 'paradise' of Dhufar or the fields of fruit trees and streams of water in the Interior. Muscat has been seen either as the 'filthiest town in the world' or the 'most picturesque' place on earth. The people have been portrayed as 'the cleanest, neatest, best dressed, and most gentlemanly of all the Arabs', and on the other hand 'the dirtiest of the human species'. The 'gravity and demeanour' of the Arabs of the Interior has been set against the 'childish' manners of the Bedouins. Even the Bedouin, himself, is represented ambiguously. Some travellers idealize him as 'the lord of creation', while the others depict him as 'savage' and 'barbarous'.

I offer these interestingly diverse pictures of Oman in order to emphasise the hypothesis discussed in the introduction that British travel writing on Oman is both various and complex. The texts that I have discussed in this thesis provide a paradigm for challenging Edward Said's project in *Orientalism*. Among British travellers to Oman, we have seen not only those who were fascinated by the life and culture of the Omanis, but also, and more significantly, those who criticised the culture of their own societies. Travellers in the nineteenth century, such as John Malcolm, John Johnson, Robert Mignan and William Palgrave, who dealt with the subject of slavery in the East did not hesitate, having seen the kindness and civility shown by Omanis to their slaves,

to criticise the brutality of Europe in its treatment of slaves. Malcolm, particularly, asked his fellow travellers to 'acknowledge the superior humanity of Asiantic nations'. Wilfred Thesiger, who travelled in the Empty Quarter in the 1940s represents a real test of *Orientalism*. Anyone who reads *Arabian Sands*, one can argue, would find it extremely difficult to fit Thesiger within Said's theory. His affinity with the Arabs and his fascination for their hospitality, bravery, nobility and tolerance, not to mention Thesiger's sever criticism of Western civilization, run against Said's general idea that Western discourse on the Middle East is Eurocentric and racist.

Many factors have contributed to the heterogeneity of British travel writing on Oman: traveller's backgrounds and objectives, time of visit and length of journey, the way of travel, peoples encountered, scholarship and resources. Travellers' biographies offered throughout this thesis show how British travellers to Oman were from different backgrounds. Among them were men of letters and novelists such as James Fraser, James Buckingham and Charles Low; government administrators and diplomats such as John Malcolm, and George Keppel; military officers and soldiers such as Robert Mignan and William Owen; enthusiastic Arabists such as Robert Binning and Samuel Miles; sailors and merchants such as Alexander Hamilton and Abraham Parsons; naval surveyors such as Wellsted, Haines, Hulton, Cruttenden and other men of the *Palinurus*. Some of these travellers were 'professional' writers who, before their coming to Oman, had travelled widely abroad and published a number of travel accounts and books, and some of them had less experience and were almost unknown to the extent that hardly ever did I find a line devoted to them in any dictionary of biography.

Travellers' purposes of travel also contributed to the ambivalence of their attitudes to Oman. Although many of them did not articulate their reasons for visiting Oman, their texts and the directions of their journeys give us some hints of their objectives. Travellers of the nineteenth century to Muscat and other cities on the coast



were generally driven by pleasure, curiosity or commerce. The bulk of them stopped in Muscat on their way from India to England and vice versa. Muscat, as mentioned, was a main *entreport* in Arabia at that time, and this explains the increasing number of British travellers throughout the nineteenth century. Surveyors of the Bombay Marine and the Indian Navy, however, were interested in scientific activities such as mapping and charting the hydrography of Oman and Southern Arabia. Travellers such as James Wellsted and Samuel Miles, who managed to travel beyond Muscat and penetrate the Interior, had a different aim that of collecting intelligence about the local tribes which might have threatened British existence in the Gulf. Bertram Thomas and Wilfred Thesiger, on the other hand, explored the Empty Quarter inspired by the lure of the 'unknown', while the late travellers Edward Henderson and Ian Skeet were motivated by oil exploration.

Travellers were also different in their time of visit and length of stay. The first generation, in the nineteenth century, from John Malcolm until Lord Curzon, did not stay in Oman for long. Their visits varied from a week to a month, and this, consequently, brought about only short memoirs scattered across different travelogues and journals. The themes they discussed in their travel accounts were also affected by the time of their journeys. Travellers of the Romantic period, for example, were generally interested in the subject of slavery, as Britain and other Western nations at that time were concerned with slaves' emancipation.<sup>1</sup> Thus, as we have seen, most of the travellers from 1800 to 1833 devoted considerable space in their travel accounts to

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<sup>1</sup> It was in 1787 that Anti-slavery movement began in Britain when a group of twelve people, including six members of Society of Friends (Quakers) organised themselves and began to publish leaflets to rouse public opinion against the slave trade. In 1807 the British government banned the slave trade and abolished slavery in the United Kingdom. Slavery abroad was still lawful, but traffic of slaves directly from Africa was prohibited. In 1833 the bill for the 'Emancipation Act' was approved by the Parliament in Britain. It gave the option to each Colonial administration to make a decision regarding whether the slaves could be totally emancipated or had to go through a series of steps to gain their freedom. For further information on the topic, see James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (London: Fontana, 1993).

the status of slaves in Oman. Moreover, because the Victorian period was considered by many postcolonial scholars as the 'apex' of British imperialism and hostility toward 'other' people in the world, we have seen that some British travellers in the second half of the nineteenth century were polemic in their attitudes toward the Omani Arabs and advocated British imperialism. John Carter, for instance, attacked the Arabs of Dhufar for being 'barbarous inhabitants', and Charles Low charged the Omanis, in general, with 'lying and cheating'. Similarly, Lord Curzon overtly attempted to defend British imperial interests and to justify British intervention in the Gulf, claiming that 'hundreds of British lives and millions of British Money have been spent in the pacification of these troublous waters'. Travellers who stayed in Oman for a long time, varying from one year to fifteen, were different from the first generation in terms of the number of travel accounts and books they wrote about the country, and the themes they were interested in. James Wellsted, Samuel Miles, Bertram Thomas, Wilfred Thesiger, Edward Henderson, David Gwynne-James and Ian Skeet devoted complete travelogues to Oman. Beyond the subject of slavery and the heat of Muscat, they described and documented history, manners, customs and every-day life of the country.

Travellers were also dissimilar in their methods of travel. Travellers who visited the littoral area in the nineteenth century limited themselves to travel by ships and boats. They walked on the streets of Muscat, Hormuz, or Salala in Dhufar but never used, or at least did not mention in their travel accounts, donkeys or camels, the traditional transportations of the East at that time. Also, they did not disguise themselves in Omani dress, though they provided descriptions of it. It seems that this generation found disguising themselves unnecessary in Muscat and other Omani coastal cities because these sea ports, particularly Muscat, were cosmopolitan places where different nations and races assembled together doing business or taking harbour for their vessels. As we have seen in chapter two, the multiculturalism of Muscat was noticed by many British



travellers who hinted that all Europeans and other races were treated with great tolerance and respect in Oman.

Travellers who explored the Interior of Oman and the Empty Quarter, however, had to use animal transport throughout their journeys because of the harsh geography and the lack of other carriers. What is amazing about the Interior travellers is that they travelled undisguised, while the tribal peoples of that region were, unlike the inhabitants of the littorals, isolated and had less contact with Europeans. James Wellsted's and Samuel Miles's lack of disguise during their travels in Oman is a point worth underscoring, for it indicates that the natives of Oman were free of xenophobia and tolerated Europeans, a fact that runs completely counter to their supposedly hostile attitude towards foreigners. The primary motive, as John Rodenbeck argues, among all the disguised European travellers and residents in the Middle East was the 'simple hope of securing relative safety and freedom from insult in public places'.<sup>2</sup> It is striking, therefore, to note that both Wellsted and Miles toured Oman unharmed, without masquerade. Nevertheless, Bertram Thomas and Wilfred Thesiger, as articulated in their travelogues and shown by their photographs, chose to dress up in the Omani 'dishdasha', wraparound, turban, dagger and sandals. Unlike Rana Kabbani, who looked to European travellers' disguise, as mentioned in chapter one, as a 'means of infiltrating' into the Eastern societies for intelligence and spying, I would argue that such a claim in no way applies to Thomas and Thesiger. Thomas probably concealed himself in Omani dress, leaving his beard to grow and abstaining from alcohol, in order to avoid some hostile Bedouin tribes in the Empty Quarter, such as the tribe of al-Saar, which was dreaded by the Arabs of the desert themselves. As for Thesiger, the issue is complex. His personality, as pointed out in chapter four, was quite ambiguous, so that it is difficult to state a definite reason for his masquerade. However, his love of the

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<sup>2</sup> John Rodenbeck, 'Dressing Native', in *Unfolding the Orient Travellers in Egypt and the Near East*, ed. by Paul and Janet Starkey (Reading: Ithaca, 2001), pp.65-100 (p. 79).

primitive life and his affinity for the Arabs make 'disguise', as a concept, does not work. When Thesiger wore Arab clothes, he did not mean to conceal his Britishness; his identity did not exist in Britain but abroad, where simple life and nomadic peoples had not 'vanished' and Western civilization had not arrived. The last generation of British travellers to Oman, examined in chapter five, neither used animals in their journeys nor disguised themselves. Probably, oil exploration and military missions compelled them to dress in specific uniforms or to keep their Western clothes, and to drive cars and trucks instead of riding camels or donkeys.

Peoples encountered by travellers in Oman have also played a part in their diverse attitudes toward the country. Inhabitants of the coastal area were always seen by travellers as different from the Omani Interiors, the dwellers of the Qara Mountain in Dhufar and the desert Arabs. These four types of Omanis are apparently dissimilar in British travel accounts. In Muscat, for instance, travellers witnessed a mixture of peoples; Arabs, Turks, Baluchis, Panians, Jews, and Africans. This multiculturalism was absent in the Interior, Dhofar or in the Empty Quarter. The Interior was inhabited by tribal natives whose religious culture and knowledge made them more conservative than the coastal dwellers, the Dhufaris or the Bedouins, who all enjoyed more liberty in their manners and customs. This point is significant, as it explains the numerous travellers who visited the littoral of Oman throughout history, and, on the other hand, the very few Europeans who saw the Interior. As for Dhofar and the Empty Quarter, the lack of travellers was related to the tribal wars and the harsh environment of the desert more than any religious attitude. Nevertheless, some travellers considered the amalgam of races in the coastal cities of Oman as evidence of tolerance and freedom, while the others conceived it as a vice that affected the 'pure blood' of Arabs. Wilfred Thesiger, for example, argues that:

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No race in the world prizes lineage so highly as the Arabs and none has kept its blood so pure. There is, of course, mixed blood in the towns, especially in the seaports, but this is only the dirty froth upon the desert's edge.<sup>3</sup>

Another traveller who noticed the differences among the peoples of Oman was Ian Skeet. After his travels in different parts of the country, he comments:

From all this it must at least be apparent that the interior Omanis are different from the coastal Muscaties, independent minded if not nationally independent. The difference is partly religious, but Omanis have been always, or even exclusively, Ibadis; the other side to their difference is their tribal nature and to understand this it is necessary to dig back into history and see how their character and traditions have been diluted by the passing centuries.<sup>4</sup>

Having studied the natives of Dhufar in terms of their manners, customs, language and anthropological features, Bertram Thomas also attempted not only to distinguish the Dhofaris from other types of Omanis, but also to single them out the Arab race, claiming that they had Abyssinian affinities.

Scholarship and knowledge resources of the individual traveller have also been matters of difference among British travellers to Oman.<sup>5</sup> Some travellers reported that they acquired European travel books before setting out for Oman; some of them quoted their predecessors, who published travel accounts on the country; while the others relied on Arabic works. Robert Binning, for example, declares that, before travelling to the East, he acquainted himself with some books about the area, such as Morier's and Brydges's Travels, as well as Scott Waring's *Tour*.<sup>6</sup> Though none of these travel books is

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<sup>3</sup> Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> Skeet, *Muscat and Oman*, p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Studying the resources of each traveller requires a lot of time and space that the current study does not allow. However, I will give here a general view of some resources that influenced British travellers in their representations of Oman.

<sup>6</sup> Although Binning does not give full details of the works of these travellers, their names are well known in the travel literature on Persia. Sir Harford Jones Brydges was a British ambassador to the royal court of Persia, and wrote *An Account of the Transactions of His Majesty's Mission to the Court of Persia in the Years 1807-11* (London: James Bohn, 1834). James Justinian Morier has been mentioned before in

concerned with Oman, it is useful to know the principle that Binning took up in his travels and observations. He writes:

Though I would never suffer myself to be led by the opinions of another, when at variance with my own deliberate conviction I have found that, when I see another's statement differing widely from my own first impressions, I have at times, been induced to investigate the subject more fully and satisfactorily.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps, one of the main and significant resources that most British travellers to Oman read is the book of *One Thousand and One Night* or *Arabian Nights*, which was translated into English from the French edition in 1704. Although many travellers did not even mention the book, its impact on their descriptions of Oman is apparent in some texts. I previously gave an example of *Arabian Night*'s inspiration to Robert Mignan in his lavish portrait of the *harem* of Sayid Said bin Sultan in 1825. Another text that shows the influence of the rhetoric of this work is Samuel Miles's picture of the bazaars of Oman. The feature of an Oriental bazaar has been frequently described in the *Arabian Nights*, which gives a close image of the Baghdad society of that period, providing us with a vivid picture of the trade in the city of the Caliphs. The crowded shops of the attar druggists were full with Eastern perfumes and overfilled the air with the aroma of spices, frankincense, aloes, wood, myrrh, rose-oil and musk, delighting the sense of smell with a mix of fragrant scents. The cloth merchants presented the silks of India, China and Persia, the cotton fabrics of Oman and Yemen, and the shawls of Cashmere. The jeweller could display the pearls of Bahrain, the precious stones of Ceylon, the ivory of Africa and India and the gums of Adel. Samuel Miles paints a similar portrait of the Omani bazaars:

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chapter one along with his famous work *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824). Edward Scott Waring was a British traveller to Persia and wrote, *A Tour to Sheeraz by the Rout of Kazroon and Feerozabad, with Various Remarks on the Manners, Customs, Laws, Language and Literature of the Persians* (London: Bulmer, 1807).

<sup>7</sup> Binning, *A Journal of Two Years' Travel*, I, pp. 121-122.



We may fairly suppose that the bazaars of Eastern cities in the early days of Islam presented much the same appearance as they do now, being filled with bustling crowds and streams of brightly and gaudily costumed human beings of various hues and of the most heterogeneous description. Itinerant vendors, water-carriers, camels, asses with water-skins, mules, customers, slaves (black and white), shaikhs on horseback, sellers, buyers, soldiers, etc., all mixed together in a jostling, hustling, hurrying throng, passing before the eye in the dark narrow passages of the extensive and vaulted bazaar, such as at Baghdad, Busra, Siraf or Sohar, Mosul or Damascus. Every nation, race, and religion has its own distinctive and characteristic dress and appearance, and a stranger must have been bewildered at the ever-changing and curious sight. No doubt the shopkeeper then as now sat motionless and dignified in his stall, silently exhibiting his wares, and asking, as he does at this day, a much higher price than he expects to get. Courteous and obliging he produced what you wanted without comment and did not pester you with anything about the next article.<sup>8</sup>

Another example of the influence of the *Arabian Nights* on Miles is his belief that Oman was the land of Sindbad, the famous sailor whose stories in *Arabian Nights* are known as 'The Voyages of Sindbad of the Sea'. Sindbad was believed to be a legendary sailor who was a successful trader and the son of a rich merchant who had died while Sindbad was a child. He inherited his father's fortune but acted foolishly and wasted his wealth. Obsessed by guilt, he sold all his leftover possessions, and set out to recover his fortune as a merchant. After making seven ambitious voyages, he came back to settle in Baghdad. Miles is convinced that Sindbad was originally from Oman and more precisely from Swaiq on the coast of Batinah.<sup>9</sup>

Some travellers might have relied on English and Arabic historical sources in approaching Oman. One of the earliest Arabic geographical works translated into English in the outset of the nineteenth century was *Al-Masalik Wa Al-Mamalik* by Ibn Hawqal, translated by Sir William Ouseley as *The Oriental Geography of Ebn Haukal, an Arabian Traveller of the Tenth Century* (London: Oriental Press, 1800). Also in 1829, Samuel Lee translated *The Travels of Ibn Batuta*, which was published in London by the Oriental Translation Committee. In 1841 the historical encyclopaedia of *Muruj*

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<sup>8</sup> Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, p. 372.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

*Al-Dhahab*, by Al-Masudi, appeared in translation by Aloys Sprenger and was published in London by the Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland. Moreover, two other Omani historical sources were translated into English in the nineteenth century, but these were devoted to the biographies of some Imams and religious scholars, and ignored the everyday life of the people. The first one is *Shua'a al-Sha'i bi-al-Lama'an fi Dhikr Asma' A'immat 'Uman* by Hamid Ibn Muhammad Ibn Ruzayq, translated by George Percy Badger as *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman from A.D. 661-1856* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1871). The second one is *Kashf al-Ghummah al-Jlami' li-Akhbar al-Ummah* by Sirhan Ibn Said Assarhani, translated by Edward Charles Ross as *Annals of Oman* (Calcutta: G. H. Rouse, 1874). Although some British travellers did not even mention these references, it is quite plausible that they had acquainted themselves with some of them. Samuel Miles, among all British travellers to Oman, was distinguished by his wide scholarship on the country. His works show the considerable effort he made in reading about Oman, not only in the translated books mentioned above, but also, and more significantly, in several classic Arabian works; this demonstrates his competency in Arabic language.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, British travellers to Oman contributed to documenting the everyday life in Oman from 1800 to 1970. Their criticism of some aspects of Omani culture should not lead us to underestimate their efforts in describing what the Omani and Arab sources have neglected. I, myself, admire their courage and patience in travelling through Oman when the country was in an extremely difficult situation. With extreme bravery and challenge, they adventured in Oman surrounded by tribal disputes, harsh topography, unbearable climate, and differences in culture, language and religion. However, it is worthy to emphasise here what British travellers themselves have

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, in *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf* Miles cites many classic Arab authors such as Abul Feda, al-Istakhri, al-Hamdani, Ibn Mojawir, Ibn al-Atheer, al-Idrisi, Ibn Khaldun and others. See, particularly, pp.498-520. See also Miles, 'A Brief Account of Four Arabian Works on the History and Geography of Arabia', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 6 (1873), 20-27.



admitted that the people of Oman were free of xenophobia, as they treated them with extreme tolerance and hospitality.

During the course of this study, some issues related to European travel writing on Oman have come up, and I would recommend that future research should explore them. The first issue is to extend research into representations of Oman to other European travel writings: Portuguese, French, Dutch, American and Russian.<sup>11</sup> American missionaries, for instance, were in Oman from 1889 to 1970. They travelled widely and left a number of books and travel accounts about the country. The most famous missionary among them was Samuel Zwemer, who published in 1900 his book *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam*, which included descriptions of his experience and travels in Oman.<sup>12</sup> Another American missionary who published a book about his journeys in Oman was Dr. Paul Harrison. His book *Doctor In Arabia* (1940) includes his medical tours in the country from 1909 to 1954.<sup>13</sup> European travel writing on Oman after 1970 also deserves another study because, as mentioned early, it is thematically and stylistically different from the works discussed in this thesis. The selected bibliography presented in Appendix 1, shows the diversity the genre encompasses: diaries, travel guides, travel accounts, pictorial works, juvenile literature, ethnographies and narratives. Another subject that needs to be explored is the impact of European travellers to Oman on English fiction. During my study of British travel writing I discovered some poems, short stories and novels that thematised the Empty Quarter as place of escape. Some poets and novelists who have never been to Oman have described the Empty Quarter ideationally, perhaps influenced by the European travellers who

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<sup>11</sup> For the works of some European travellers in Oman 1500 to 1970, see: Marshall, 'European Travellers in Oman and South East Arabia', Billecocq, *Oman: Twenty-Five Centuries of Travel Writing*, and Bidwell, 'Bibliographical Notes on European Accounts of Muscat'.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Zwemer, *Arabia: the Cradle of Islam: Studies in the Geography, People and Politics of the Peninsula, with an Account of Islam and Mission-Work* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1900).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Wilberforce Harrison, *Doctor In Arabia* (New York: Day, 1940).

visited Oman throughout history. In Appendices 2 and 3, I offer a bibliography of some English fiction and samples of English poetry on the Empty Quarter.



## Appendix 1

### A Select Bibliography of European Travel Writing on Post-1970 Oman

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## Appendix 2

### A Select Bibliography of English Fiction on the Empty Quarter

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Canaday, John, 'The Empty Quarter' *New England Review*, 20, n. 4 (1999), p.57

Draycott, Jane, *Prince Rupert's Drop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)

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Sillitoe, Alan, *Collected Poems* (London: Harper Collins, 1993)

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Coppel, Alfred, *The Apocalypse Brigade* (London: Macmillan, 1981)

Innes, Hammond, *The Doomed Oasis: A Novel of Arabia* (London: Collins, 1960)

Wilkinson, David Marion, *The Empty Quarter* (California: Boaz Publishing, 1998)

#### 3. Short Stories:

Mesmer, Sharon, *The Empty Quarter: Stories* (New York: Hanging Loose Press, 2000)



## Appendix 3

### Samples of English Poetry on the Empty Quarter

#### Inside Arabia, by Fergus Allen:

1      The inhabitants of the Empty Quarter  
 2      Sleep much of the day and move by night,  
 3      Stepping out from behind the breasts of sand-dunes  
 4      To resume the tête-à-têtes whose forgotten  
 5      Difficult-to-pin-down beginnings lie  
 6      In leftovers from usage and event,  
 7      Bones piled on the rim of the plat du jour.

8      Questions about the way to the Fertile Crescent  
 9      Are met with smiles and humbug about camels  
 10     And tradition and the lack of markers.  
 11     But saddled transport seems to come and go  
 12     At near enough the appointed times,  
 13     Theatrical bargaining fills the evenings  
 14     And at full moon the haggled-over bales  
 15     Can be seen lurching away into the uplands.

16     Overflown by migrating storks,  
 17     We have to hang about for our guides---  
 18     Shadowy characters apt to materialize  
 19     Smiling from the shelter of night-cold rocks,  
 20     Who could all do with lessons in voice production  
 21     Or simple specifics against catarrh  
 22     And the hawking and spitting behind the tents.

23     But insofar as a message emerges  
 24     The tone is neutral, some might say teasing.  
 25     The granaries of the nomads are all around,  
 26     Their latitudes and longitudes a food  
 27     For the constantly baffled numerologist  
 28     Seated under the doum-palm with his abacus.  
 29     The problem is fine-tuning the dowsing-rod  
 30     To the vibrations of rice, wheat, sorghum, maize.

#### Timed Exposure, by Jane Draycott

1      At the eleventh hour in the Empty Quarter  
 2      we stand and watch our shadows

- 3 spinning on the clock face of the sand.
- 4 We are the dunes, the Chiltern hundreds,  
5 ash and lilac, oak and beech wood  
6 made by all the women of your family.
- 7 Our room is as full as a quarrel, as empty  
8 as a child with the windows out. Clouds  
9 of our old clothes race across the floor.
- 10 We are not even the stars. The lid of our house  
11 is off, and in the lava trail of tail-lights on the hill  
12 we must make all our journeys over again.

**Empty Quarter, by Alan Sillitoe:**

- 1 He meditates on the Empty Quarter:  
2 Mosque of sand dissolving through egg-timer's  
3 Neck. Looks on camel-loads  
4 Starting for Oman or Muscat  
5 By invisible Mercator's thread  
6 That burns the hoof and shrivels  
7 All humps of water. Empty Quarter lures,  
8 He travels with his heaped caravan  
9 Earth-tracks marked as lines  
10 Of unstable land, golden sand-grit  
11 Lifting up grey dunes near vulcan-  
12 Trees and foul magnesium wells  
13 That asps and camels drink from.  
14 He throws off bells, beads, silk, guns  
15 Knives and slippers, scattering all  
16 No longer needed---camel meat  
17 For scavengers, everything  
18 But his own dishrags of flesh.
- 19 Naked and demented he hugs  
20 A tree rooted in the widest waste  
21 Catching dew from God at dawn  
22 And dates dropping through rottenness,  
23 Tastes the lone tree's shade  
24 No one can chop or whip him from,  
25 Till one day ravelled in his own white flame  
26 He abandons the Empty Quarter  
27 And trudges back to terrify the world.



**The Empty Quarter, by John Canaday:**

In early spring, here in the Rub'al Khali,  
Gabriel swings his goad over the humped backs  
of swollen clouds. They roar like angry camels  
and thunder toward the fields of the fellahin.  
At night, I dream of grass so green it speaks.  
But at noon, even the dry chatter of djinn  
leaves the wadis. The sun lowers its bucket,  
though my body is the only well for miles.  
A dropped stone calls back from the bottom  
with the voice of a starving locust: Make it  
your wish, habibi, and the rain will walk  
over the dry hills of your eves on tiptoes  
as the poppies weave themselves into a robe  
to mantle the broad shoulders of the desert.  
The words uncoil like smoke from a smothered fire,  
rising leisurely out of me as though to mark  
where a castaway has come aground at last.  
And yet I have not spoken. My voice limps  
on old bones, its legs too dry and brittle  
to leap like a sated locust into song.  
But I imagine what was said or might  
be said by some collective throat about  
the plowman loving best the raw, turned earth,  
or the Caliph longing for his desert lodge,  
where ghoulém whisper like the wind at prayer,  
and poppies bow their gaudy heads toward Mecca,  
each one mumbling a different word for dust.

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